Depths of Kazrund-Vahl

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The Depths of the Mountain

The air was thick with dust and the lingering scent of sweat, smoke, and damp earth. A dim glow from a dying lantern cast flickering shadows over the rough-hewn stone walls of the small dwelling. Ogar groaned as he stirred from his cot, his muscles aching from the previous day's labor. His bed was little more than a stack of furs thrown over a slab of carved rock, but it had served him well enough for years.

With a yawn that rumbled in his broad chest, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and scratched at his thick, unkempt beard. His home was a modest hole in the rock, carved by his own hands over a decade ago. The ceiling was low, dark streaks from soot clinging to its craggy surface. A wooden table sat against the far wall, covered in empty tankards, a half-eaten loaf of bread, and a knife dulled from frequent use.

Reaching for a pipe resting on the table, he packed it with rough-ground hemp, striking a spark from a flint and steel to set it alight. He inhaled deeply, the acrid smoke curling from his lips as he leaned back for a moment, savoring the first drag of the morning. His other hand reached for a thick bottle filled with Darkbane, a liquor so harsh it could strip paint off steel. He took a deep swig, grimacing as the fire ran down his throat and settled like molten iron in his belly. That would wake him up proper.

Breakfast was simple. A thick slab of salted meat, still clinging to the bone, and a hunk of bread so tough it could double as a weapon. He tore into it without ceremony, his mind already on the long day ahead.

After dressing in a heavy, soot-stained tunic and thick leather breeches, he pulled on his boots, grabbed his mining pick, and slung his belt of tools over his shoulder. He blew out the lantern, the tiny space falling into darkness behind him as he stepped out into the tunnels.

The ancient mountain had stood for longer than even the oldest dwarves could remember. Some said the gods themselves had shaped its heart, filling it with veins of ore so that dwarven kin might never go wanting.

The main tunnel stretched outward in both directions, its walls braced with thick wooden beams that groaned under the weight of the mountain above. Lanterns hung from metal hooks, their flickering flames casting elongated shadows across the damp stone. The air smelled of sweat, iron, and the unmistakable scent of earth long undisturbed.

As Ogar moved forward, the sound of pickaxes striking stone echoed all around him. Other dwarves were already at work, their broad backs glistening with sweat as they hacked away at the walls, shoveling rock and ore into heavy wooden carts. Some were smelting raw iron at a forge deeper in the tunnels, the heat from their flames turning the air thick with smoke and embers.

He passed by Tormli and Brokk, two miners he had known since childhood. Tormli, a stout dwarf with a braided beard, spat into the dirt and nodded.
"Late again, Ogar. You drinkin’ that swill before work again?"

Ogar exhaled a plume of smoke, smiling. "Aye. And I'll still outwork ye both before the day's through."

Brokk chuckled, wiping soot from his forehead with a thick arm. "We'll see about that."

Ogar grunted a farewell and continued down the tunnel. The deeper he went, the quieter it became—not from a lack of workers, but from the sheer depth of the tunnels. Some of the lanterns here were dim, their oil running low, making the shadows feel thicker, heavier.

At last, he arrived at his designated mining site, a section of the tunnel wall still rich with untapped veins of ore. The rock face was rugged and unbroken, the faint glint of metal peeking from beneath its surface. He rolled his shoulders, gripping his pickaxe tightly.

With a grunt, he swung the first hard strike into the stone, the impact echoing through the tunnels. Chips of rock splintered away, and Ogar fell into rhythm, hacking and carving, sweat beginning to bead on his brow.

Another day in the depths. Another day beneath the mountain.

The rhythmic clang of metal against stone filled the tunnel, each strike of Ogar's pickaxe sending small shards of rock flying. His muscles worked on instinct, hardened by years of mining. The air was thick with dust, clinging to his skin and beard, mixing with the sweat that dripped from his brow. The glow of the nearby lantern flickered with each impact, casting his shadow against the uneven rock walls.

Every few swings, he paused to catch his breath, wiping sweat from his forehead with a calloused hand. He reached for a leather waterskin hanging from a wooden post, uncorking it and taking a deep swig. The water was warm from being carried all day, but it was refreshing enough. He let out a satisfied sigh before capping it again and rolling his shoulders.

As he leaned against the tunnel wall, letting his muscles relax for a moment, he heard footsteps approaching. Borim, an older miner with streaks of gray in his beard, emerged from the dimly lit passage. He was thickset and broad-shouldered, his hands calloused from a lifetime of hard labor. He carried a crude roll of parchment tucked under one arm, a detailed blueprint of the expanding tunnel system.

Borim nodded to Ogar. "Hard at it, I see."

Ogar exhaled a stream of hemp smoke, smiling. "Aye. Ain't got much choice, do we?"

Borim chuckled, then unfurled the blueprint against the rock wall. "Listen, we're thinkin' of extendin' this tunnel down another forty feet. But the ceiling's unstable here." He tapped a section on the parchment with a thick, dirt-streaked finger. "If we don't brace it right, we'll have a bloody cave-in on our hands."

Ogar leaned in, eyes narrowing. "We'll need crossbeams every ten paces, not fifteen. Stone's weak here, been cracked before we even started diggin'. You can see the fault lines runnin' through it."

Borim nodded approvingly. "Aye, I was thinkin’ the same. We’ll haul in extra timber tomorrow. No shortcuts."

"Damn right," Ogar grunted. "A shortcut’s a death trap."

The two exchanged a knowing glance. In these tunnels, a single mistake could mean burial under a hundred tons of stone.

Borim clapped Ogar on the shoulder. "Right then, I’ll tell the foreman. Get back to swingin’ that pick."

With that, the older dwarf strode off into the tunnels, and Ogar returned to his work. His pickaxe bit into the rock over and over again, sending out sparks as he unearthed veins of iron ore gleaming in the lantern light. He pried out chunks of raw metal, brushing away dust and debris before loading them into the nearby wooden cart.

Hours passed in a relentless cycle of hacking, shoveling, and carting ore to the collection point. He pushed his overfilled cart through the narrow tunnels, sweat pouring down his back. At the collection site, dwarves worked with smelting furnaces and sorting stations, their voices gruff as they checked each miner’s haul.

When the final chunk of iron ore was accounted for, the long day’s labor was done.

Ogar trudged through the dim tunnels, his body aching, his arms sore from the day’s exertions. He had one last stop before heading home—the mountain spring.

The underground spring was nestled in a cavern where cold water trickled down smooth stone, pooling into a deep basin that had served as the miners’ washing place for generations. The water was ice-cold, drawn from the heart of the mountain itself.

Ogar stripped down to his undergarments and stepped in. The shock of cold water struck him like a hammer, and he sucked in a sharp breath. But after a moment, it was invigorating. The grime and sweat of the long day washed away as he submerged himself, the crisp water biting into his skin like a winter wind.

For a while, he simply floated, staring at the rocky ceiling above, listening to the faint echoes of water dripping from stalactites.

Then, with a final scrub of his face and beard, he climbed out, shaking off excess water before donning his clothes. Refreshed and renewed, he made his way home.

Ogar’s dwelling was small but cozy. The stone walls were rough and dark, but a large fireplace dominated one corner, its hearth built from heavy slabs of slate. The fire within crackled warmly, filling the room with flickering amber light.

The furniture was minimal but sturdy—a thick wooden table, a few chairs, and a bed pushed into an alcove, piled with some furs. A single shelf held a collection of tools, an old steel helm, and a few well-worn books. No decorations, no wasted space—just the essentials of a miner’s life.

After hanging his damp clothes near the fire to dry, he sat at the table and poured himself a generous mug of Darkbane. The liquor burned his throat, but he welcomed it. He ate roasted meat and dense dwarven bread, tearing into it with slow, measured bites.

Then, as the fire warmed his tired bones, he reached for a weathered old tome—a mining manual passed down through generations. Its leather cover was cracked, its pages yellowed with age, but the wisdom within was still sound.

He flipped to a section about tunnel construction, running a thick finger along the faded text. The words were written in Old Dwarvish, but he could still make them out:

"The bones of the mountain are both strong and fickle. Where stone sleeps firm, tunnels may last an age. But where stone is brittle, the mountain will reclaim itself in time. A miner's first duty is not to the ore, but to the stone. Secure the beams, brace the ceilings, and listen to the mountain's whispers. It will tell you when it is pleased, and when it is angered."

Ogar grunted. Sound advice.

He took another drag from his pipe, the sweet scent of hemp mixing with the woodsmoke of the fire. His eyelids grew heavy as the heat and the drink settled into his bones.

The day's work was done. Tomorrow, the pickaxe would swing again.

For now, he rested.

The mountain was always awake, even when its people slept. The distant clang of hammers and the deep, rumbling echoes of carts rolling over stone had long since become part of Ogar’s dreams. The life of a miner was one of routine—an endless cycle of digging, building, reinforcing, and hauling.

Ogar stirred from his furs as the warmth of the fireplace had long since faded, leaving only embers behind. His body ached, his shoulders stiff, but there was no use lying in bed. With a grunt, he pushed himself upright, stretching the soreness from his limbs before pulling on his work clothes. His tunic smelled of sweat and smoke, his leather breeches stiff with dried dust. It didn't matter—by day's end, they'd be dirtied again.

After a quick breakfast of bread, cheese, and smoked meat, washed down with the last of his water, he grabbed his tools and stepped out into the tunnels.

The larger chamber he entered was one of the few places within the mine where space was deliberately carved wider than necessity dictated. It wasn’t just for comfort—it was a place of logistics, where supplies were stored and distributed to different teams of miners.

Stacks of thick wooden beams, cut and prepared in workshops further up the mountain, were piled against the walls. The scent of sawdust mixed with the usual smells of damp stone and oil lanterns. Metal braces, nails, and coils of thick rope were stored in crates alongside the timber.

Ogar approached a waiting rail cart, a sturdy construct of iron and wood, built to withstand the weight of stone and ore. He reached for the first heavy wooden beam, hoisting it onto his

shoulder with a grunt before loading it onto the cart. One by one, he worked, stacking the beams neatly, his muscles burning with each lift. Sweat formed on his brow despite the underground chill.

As he worked, a foreman, a gruff dwarf named Rurik, walked past, chewing on the end of a thick tobacco roll.

"Tunnel's been extended overnight," Rurik grunted. "Your lot's got more diggin' to do today. Don't skimp on the supports—rock's gettin' loose down there."

Ogar spat to the side. "Aye, I saw the fault lines yesterday. Already planned for extra beams."

Rurik nodded approvingly before heading off, and Ogar gave the last beam a firm push into place before grabbing the rail cart's handle. He heaved it forward onto the tracks, the iron wheels grinding against the rails as he set off toward the deeper tunnels.

When he arrived at his digging site, he saw that the night shift had expanded the tunnel a good twenty feet deeper. Fresh pick marks lined the walls, and piles of loose stone sat waiting to be cleared. More veins of iron ore and other minerals gleamed under the lantern light, waiting to be extracted.

But first, the tunnel needed supporting.

Ogar wiped sweat from his brow, surveying the blueprints etched on a crude parchment nailed to a wooden post. The drawings were precise, showing exactly where each beam, brace, and nail needed to go. He ran a thick, calloused finger along the page, mentally marking the placements.

He set to work.

The first beam was the hardest—it had to be anchored firmly against the stone so that the entire structure wouldn't collapse later. He lifted the massive support beam, aligning it beneath the tunnel ceiling, where the natural fault lines indicated stress points in the rock.

Thunk.

The beam slid into place, and Ogar grabbed a heavy iron hammer, raising it above his head before slamming a thick iron nail into the wood. The metal rang against the nail, sinking it deep into the beam and locking it against the stone.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

One nail. Then another. Then another.

Sweat dripped down his temple, but he barely noticed. He moved to the next crossbeam, setting it in place, then grabbing a saw from his tool belt to trim down a support plank to fit properly. The sharp rasp of sawing filled the tunnel, mingling with the distant clinks of other miners working elsewhere.

Piece by piece, he constructed the frame—a network of wooden supports that would keep the tunnel stable as they dug deeper.

With the final iron brace hammered into place, Ogar stepped back, inspecting his work. The tunnel was reinforced, safe for now, and he could finally return to what he did best—mining.

Ogar grabbed his pickaxe, tightened his grip, and swung hard at the stone.

The rock resisted at first, as it always did, but after a few strikes, cracks formed in the surface. Each swing sent shards of stone splintering off, revealing dark veins of iron ore underneath.

He pried a chunk loose, then another. He worked steadily, filling his cart bit by bit, his world reduced to the sound of metal striking stone and the occasional grunts of exertion.

Each chunk of rich iron ore was carefully hauled to the cart, stacked on top of previous loads. Sweat and dust covered his arms, his tunic dark with grime, but he barely noticed.

Once the cart was filled to the brim, he gripped the wooden handles and began pushing it down the track, his muscles straining against the weight. The iron wheels squealed, the cart’s bulk fighting against the rails as he trudged forward.

At the collection point, dwarves worked in tandem, sorting ore, refining it, and preparing it for smelting. Furnaces roared in the background, filling the air with the acrid scent of burning coal and melting metal.

Ogar emptied his cart, stacking his share of ore with the others. With a nod to the overseer, he turned back, rolling his stiff shoulders.

Another day, another haul.

The day's work had left Ogar’s muscles aching and his throat dry as dust, but he had no intention of heading straight home. After spending all day in the mines, the only proper way to end the evening was with a mug of strong ale in his hand.

The Golden Beard Tavern was nestled in a large, open cavern carved into the heart of the mountain, its stone walls stained with years of pipe smoke and spilled drink. A roaring hearth at the center of the room cast long shadows over thick wooden tables, where dwarves gathered in raucous conversation, drinking and singing off the strain of the day's labor.

Ogar pushed open the heavy oak doors, stepping inside as the familiar scent of roasted meat, ale, and tobacco smoke filled his nostrils. His boots clunked against the stone floor as he made his way toward the bar.

"Darkbrew, strong," he grunted to the barkeep, a burly dwarf with a beard braided in three thick strands.

"Aye," the barkeep nodded, reaching for a clay tankard and pulling dark ale from a heavy wooden keg. He slammed the full mug on the bar. "That'll put hair on yer chest, if ye’ve still got room for more."

Ogar smiled, taking a long, deep gulp of the bitter ale before turning toward a corner table where his friends, Tormli and Brokk, were already seated.

The two dwarves grinned as he approached, raising their mugs in greeting.

"Ah, there he is," Brokk rumbled, his voice thick with drink. "Thought the mountain swallowed ye whole."

"I was diggin' my way back out," Ogar retorted, dropping into a sturdy wooden chair, his pickaxe leaning against the side.

Tormli, his cheeks flushed red from drink, took another deep swig before leaning in with a conspiratorial look. "Boys… ye ever heard the tale of the Old Tunnels?"

Ogar raised an eyebrow as he took another sip. "Aye, we all have. Sealed off for bein' unsafe."

Tormli wagged a thick finger, eyes gleaming. "Unsafe, aye. But not just 'cause of collapses."

Brokk leaned forward, intrigued. "Go on, then. What're ye gettin' at?"

Tormli lowered his voice, though the din of the tavern made it barely necessary. "It's said that those tunnels… they ain't just any old forgotten mine shafts. They date back to the time of the Old Kings—back when Elbrin Ironmantle ruled these mountains."

Ogar furrowed his brow, recalling what he knew of that ancient era. Elbrin Ironmantle had been one of the greatest kings of the dwarves, ruling thousands of years ago when their empire stretched across the under-mountain halls and beyond. But those days were long gone, the golden age buried under stone and time.

"They say," Tormli continued, his voice dipping lower, "that King Elbrin's tomb still lies somewhere in those tunnels. A great underground crypt, untouched for ages. A resting place fit for a king—filled with gold, relics, and treasures long lost."

Brokk scoffed, though he still took another long gulp of ale. "Bah. If it's so untouched, why hasn't anyone found it? We've been diggin' in these mountains for centuries."

"Because," Tormli said, eyes gleaming, "the tunnels that lead to it… are the ones sealed away. Too dangerous. They say miners went in centuries ago, never came back."

Ogar exhaled through his nose, thinking. He knew from old stone records that there had been conflicts in those times. Not just with orcs and goblins, but civil wars between dwarven clans —power struggles for the throne.

"Aye," Ogar muttered, "back then, the Ironmantles warred with the Stonefists, fightin' over the throne. Half the tunnels were collapsed on purpose—sabotaged to keep the enemy from movin' underground."

Tormli nodded eagerly. "Exactly. Who's to say Elbrin wasn't buried in one of those lost halls? His tomb… just waitin' to be uncovered."

The three sat in thoughtful silence for a moment before Brokk let out a hearty laugh and slammed his mug on the table.

"Bah! Enough of that talk. A tomb ain't worth shite if it’s buried under ten thousand tons of rock! Let’s drink!"

Ogar smiled, raising his mug. "Aye. To Elbrin’s ghost—wherever the hell he is."

"To the ghost king!" Tormli and Brokk echoed, clanking their mugs together before downing the ale.

The night blurred into a haze of drink and laughter. The three dwarves ate a hearty meal of thick porridge, roasted boar, and heavy bread, all while continuing to refill their tankards.

Soon enough, a group of dwarves near the hearth broke into song—a deep, guttural hymn of ancient days, voices rising and falling like the echoes of a deep mine.

Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk joined in, their voices booming through the tavern:

"In halls of stone, we work and toil,
Through iron veins and mountain soil.
The pickaxe sings, the hammer rings,
For dwarves endure all sufferings!"

"So drink, my kin, and feast tonight,
For morning brings the miner’s plight.
But though we dig, and though we bleed,
The stone will give us all we need!"

The tavern roared as mugs slammed against tables, and ale sloshed onto the floor.

Ogar laughed, feeling the warmth of drink, song, and friendship settle deep in his chest.

Tomorrow, the mountain would demand its due again.

But for now, the Golden Beard was alive with fire and song.

The tunnels swayed as Ogar left the Golden Beard Tavern, his mind thick with ale and song. His feet dragged unevenly over the stone floor, his body heavy with drink, but there was a warmth in his chest—a haze of camaraderie and the lingering chorus of dwarven voices still echoing in his mind.

The smoky air of the tavern still clung to his clothes, mixing with the scent of spilled ale and roasted meat. He grumbled as he navigated the winding tunnels back to his home, nearly stumbling twice on the uneven stone.

At last, he reached his modest dwelling and pushed the heavy door open. The fireplace’s embers had long since faded, leaving the air cool and dark. With a deep grunt, he grabbed his pipe, packed it lazily with hemp, and struck a flint to light it.

The sweet, earthy scent filled the room as he inhaled deeply, letting the calming burn of the smoke sink into his chest.

"Bah," he muttered, slumping onto his bed, boots still on.

The room spun as he exhaled a thick plume of smoke, his limbs growing heavier by the second. His eyes closed, the warmth of drink, hemp, and exhaustion dragging him into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The next morning was unforgiving.

Ogar grumbled curses as he rolled from his bed, his skull throbbing like a war drum. He took a long drink of cold water, splashed some on his face, and shoved some bread into his mouth before trudging back into the depths of the mine.

The work was relentless.

At the deepest parts of the tunnels, where lanterns flickered weakly against the thick dark, he swung his pickaxe again and again. The air was thick with dust, and each impact sent tremors through the rock.

The walls groaned around him. Here, the mountain was alive.

Sweat dripped down his back as he worked, iron ringing against stone, the repetitive motion keeping his mind empty, focused only on the next swing, the next crack, the next haul.

After hours of grueling work, his bladder demanded relief. He muttered to himself, dropping his pickaxe and heading toward a darker alcove a short distance from the mining site.

Ogar unzipped his breeches and sighed as he let loose, leaning against the cool rock wall. His body relaxed, the steady dripping sound echoing faintly in the tunnel.

Then—a sound.

At first, he thought it was just settling stone. But no—this was different. A low scratching. A faint rustling. Close. Too close.

His drunken haze vanished in an instant.

The moment he turned his head—something lunged at him.

A guttural screech tore through the tunnel as small, clawed hands wrapped around his throat.

Ogar stumbled backward, nearly toppling over, his pants still unfastened as the goblin—a wiry, pale-skinned creature with jagged teeth and wild yellow eyes—clawed at him violently.

The creature shrieked in its foul language, spittle flying from its twisted mouth.

"Kzz’lak! Graakh’voth!" it snarled, sinking its teeth into Ogar’s shoulder.

Pain flared as the sharp teeth punctured flesh, but Ogar barely had time to register it before he slammed back into the rock wall, the goblin's clawed fingers tightening around his throat.

The creature was feral, wild, its bony limbs deceptively strong as it fought with pure savagery.

Ogar's mind reeled. He had been in plenty of tavern brawls, but never had he been attacked while mid-piss.

With a roar of fury, he threw his entire weight forward, knocking the goblin off balance. They tumbled to the ground, the creature clawing at his face, biting, spitting, screeching.

Ogar's thick arms grappled the goblin, his powerful hands wrapping around its scrawny throat as he slammed its bony head into the stone floor.

Crack!

The goblin yelped in pain, but it raked its claws across Ogar's face in retaliation, drawing bloody gashes along his cheek.

"I'll rip yer damned head off, ye filthy cave-rat!" Ogar snarled, spitting blood and rage.

The goblin hissed, spitting a curse in its wretched tongue.

"Zuuuk! Dwarf meat—soft! Dwarf meat—mine!"

It lurched forward, its teeth snapping inches from Ogar's face.

The fight turned brutal, savage. They rolled, slammed, punched, and clawed, their bodies locked in a desperate struggle for dominance.

Ogar's raw strength began to overwhelm the goblin, who was smaller, weaker—but faster and vicious.

The creature fought like a wild beast, biting deep into Ogar's forearm, tearing at his thick, calloused hands.

Ogar bellowed in fury, grabbed the goblin by the throat, and slammed it against the wall with all his strength.

"Ye like biting, ye little bastard? Here's one fer ye!"

He headbutted the goblin full-force.

The creature shrieked, dazed from the impact, but before Ogar could deliver a killing blow, the goblin twisted free, shrieking something in its filthy tongue and scuttled away, disappearing into the tunnel it had come from.

Panting, bleeding, shaking with rage, Ogar staggered forward, gripping his bruised throat and bloody arm.

His heart pounded in his chest.

His breath came in ragged gasps.

Ogar stood there in the damp tunnel, panting, his hands still clenched into fists, his muscles burning from the struggle. His forearm throbbed where the goblin's teeth had sunk in, and blood still trickled from the scratches along his face.

He took a deep breath and let out a string of curses, his voice echoing through the silent tunnel.

"Filthy little shit… should've crushed yer skull."

He wiped the blood from his face with a rough swipe of his sleeve and splashed cold water from his flask onto his wounds, the chill biting into his raw skin. He took a deep swig, washing down the lingering taste of iron in his mouth.

His mind spun as he stood in the tunnel, staring into the darkness where the goblin had fled.

Where the hell had the bastard come from?

There hadn't been goblins in these tunnels for years—not since the last major clear-out. And yet, this one had come crawling from somewhere deeper, from some forgotten hole.

His thoughts turned to the sealed tunnels. The old mines, the deep places dwarves no longer dared to tread. The places that had been closed off generations ago.

Could the goblin have come from there?

Ogar gritted his teeth, his anger flaring again. He should have killed it. Now it would scurry off, tell its kin, and gods only knew how many more might come crawling through the tunnels.

But he wasn't unprepared this time. If another came for his throat, he would be ready.

With that thought, he turned back to his work, gripping his pickaxe tightly and slamming it into the rock wall with renewed ferocity.

The hours dragged on, the sound of iron biting into stone filling the tunnels. Ogar worked harder than usual, his mind caught in a storm of thoughts as he dug, hauled, and loaded ore onto the carts.

His muscles burned, his hands ached, but still, he pushed on.

By the time he finished for the day, his body was heavy with exhaustion, but his mind was still sharp and restless.

As he made his way back through the tunnels, swinging his pickaxe over his shoulder, he spotted a familiar face.

Tormli.

The stocky dwarf leaned against a wooden support beam, gnawing on a strip of dried meat. His braided beard was dusted with coal, and he had the smell of ale on his breath, despite it being barely past work hours.

Ogar grunted a greeting, stopping in front of him.

"I had a fight with a goblin today."

Tormli raised an eyebrow, chewing slowly. "Aye? A goblin?"

"Aye," Ogar said, rubbing his bruised arm. "Little bastard jumped me while I was takin' a piss. Nearly ripped my damn throat out."

For a moment, Tormli just stared, and then he burst into laughter.

"Hah! That's rich. Goblins in the shithouse. Next thing ye'll tell me, orcs are hidin' in our soup pots."

Ogar's expression darkened. "I ain't laughin', Torm. That little rat nearly killed me."

Tormli wiped a tear from his eye, still chuckling. "Ah, come on. Ye probably just ran into some stray tunnel-rat. Even if it were a goblin, what of it? There's always a few stragglers lurkin' about. No need to go pissin' yerself over it."

Ogar grunted, his mood soured further. "I'll not be caught unarmed again."

Tormli snorted, clapping Ogar on the shoulder. "Aye, aye. Go get yerself a fine blade, then. Just don't go swingin' it 'round like a drunken fool."

Ogar grumbled under his breath, waving him off as he continued toward his home.

When he reached his dwelling, Ogar wasted no time. He dropped off his tools, splashed some cold water on his face, and set out again—this time, toward the forge district.

The armorer's shop was a small but sturdy chamber nestled near the smithing halls, where the heat of molten metal and the ringing of hammers on anvils filled the air.

The armorer, a grizzled dwarf named Grendrik, barely looked up from his sharpening wheel as Ogar stepped in.

"Need somethin'?"

"Aye," Ogar grunted, scanning the racks of weapons. "A short sword. Somethin' simple. Sturdy."

Grendrik snorted, wiping his calloused hands on his apron. "A miner takin' up a blade, eh? Goin' huntin' for rocks, are ye?"

Ogar scowled. "Goblins."

That made Grendrik pause. His eyes narrowed slightly, and after a moment, he grunted and turned toward one of the weapon racks.

He pulled down a short, thick-bladed sword with a simple leather-wrapped hilt. The edge gleamed in the forge light, and the metal was strong—dwarven steel, meant to last.

"Good balance," Grendrik muttered, handing it over. "Not too fancy, but it'll gut a goblin easy enough."

Ogar weighed the weapon in his hand, giving it a few test swings. It felt good, solid. Trustworthy.

"I'll take it," he said.

Grendrik nodded. "Thirty silver."

Ogar dug into his coin pouch and tossed the money onto the counter.

As he strapped the new sword onto his belt, he felt something shift inside him. A new resolve.

If there were more goblins down in the mines, he'd be ready for them this time.

Before heading home, he made one more stop—to the drill chambers, where the clan's warriors trained.

The battlemaster, Durn Ironfist, was a scarred veteran, his broad frame covered in old wounds that spoke of decades of war. He stood in the center of the chamber, barking orders at young dwarves practicing their swings.

Ogar stepped forward, clearing his throat. "Durn."

The old warrior turned, eyeing Ogar's new blade. "What's this, miner? Takin' up steel now?"

"Aye," Ogar said. "Had a run-in with something nasty. Want to be ready next time."

Durn snorted, arms crossed. "A sword ain't just a longer pickaxe, boy. Ye know how to use it?"

Ogar hesitated. "Not well enough."

The battlemaster smiled. "Then ye best learn. Pick it up. Show me what ye got."

Ogar drew the blade, feeling its weight settle in his grip, and squared off.

The lesson began.

Ogar stood before Durn Ironfist, his new short sword in hand, his stance steady but his confidence uncertain. It had been twenty years since he had last held a proper blade in combat training. Back then, he was a young dwarf of twenty, forced—like all in the clan—to undergo basic battle training. But once his duty was done, he had gone back to the mines, leaving swordplay behind in favor of pickaxes and stonework.

Now, at forty, he was no longer that young lad, but he wasn't an old dwarf either. His arms were strong, his shoulders broad, but his instincts were dulled by years of mining rather than fighting.

Durn crossed his arms, eyeing Ogar like a blacksmith examining an old, rusted axe.

"Ye've held a sword before, I'll give ye that. But holdin' one and usin' one proper ain't the same thing," the scarred veteran grunted.

Ogar shifted his grip on the hilt, rolling his shoulders. "Aye, I went through the basic training like all young dwarves. But that was twenty years ago. I ain't swung a blade since."

Durn snorted, stroking his thick beard. "Well, at least ye ain't startin' from nothin'. But bein' out of practice can get ye killed quicker than never learnin' at all."

Ogar grunted in agreement, planting his feet on the stone floor. "That's why I'm here. Let's get to it."

Durn's grizzled face cracked into a knowing smile. "Aye, let's see if ye remember how not to get yerself gutted."

Durn stepped back, drawing his own blunt-edged training sword, a heavy thing of dull iron, meant to bruise rather than cut. He tossed Ogar a similar one, and the weight felt awkward in his grip—not as familiar as his pickaxe, but not completely foreign either.

"First things first," Durn said, pacing around him. "Ye got the strength. Ain't no doubt about that. But brute force don't mean shite if ye ain't balanced. A sword ain't a hammer, Ogar. Ye don't swing it like ye're tryin' to crack a boulder."

Ogar nodded, gripping the sword tighter, standing ready.

Durn motioned to one of the training dwarves. "Lad, grab a blade. Ye're gonna spar with our miner here."

A younger dwarf—probably no older than twenty-five, stocky and eager—stepped forward, raising his blunt training sword. He grinned at Ogar.

"Don't go easy on me, old-timer," the younger dwarf joked.

Ogar snorted, rolling his shoulders. "Aye, and don't go cryin' when I knock ye on yer arse, lad."

They stepped into stance, and the first clash of steel rang out.

The young dwarf came in quick, trying to land a strike on Ogar's side, but years of work in the mines had kept Ogar's reflexes sharp enough. He raised his sword, parrying the blow, though his movements were stiff.

"Too slow, Ogar!" Durn barked. "Loosen up! Ye're movin' like ye're still holdin' a pickaxe!"

Ogar gritted his teeth, stepping to the side, letting instinct take over. The next time the young dwarf swung, Ogar sidestepped, bringing his sword up to deflect and counter, just as he had learned all those years ago.

His stance improved, his balance steadied.

The young dwarf came at him again, faster, but Ogar's blade met his every strike, though each parry sent a shock up his arm, reminding him that he wasn't as fluid as he used to be.

But it was coming back. Slowly.

The young dwarf lunged, and Ogar did what felt natural—he twisted his body, dodging the strike, and with a heavy step forward, he swept the young lad's legs out from under him.

The dwarf hit the ground with a grunt, blinking up at Ogar.

Ogar smiled, panting. "Told ye not to go easy on me."

Durn chuckled. "Not bad. Ye ain't completely useless, after all."

Durn walked forward, tossing the training dwarf a nod before waving him off. The young one climbed to his feet and muttered something about needing a drink.

Ogar wiped sweat from his forehead, turning to Durn. "So? How'd I do?"

Durn grinned. "Better than I expected. But ye still got one big weakness."

Ogar frowned, his grip on his sword tightening. "What's that?"

Durn's smile widened.

Then—suddenly—he stepped forward and drove his heavy boot straight into Ogar's gut.

The blow hit like a hammer to the stomach.

Ogar's breath vanished in an instant.

His eyes bulged, and he stumbled back, his sword clattering to the floor as he doubled over, clutching his stomach.

His vision blurred, his head spinning. He sank to his knees, gasping, his body refusing to take in air.

Then, darkness.

When Ogar came to, he was flat on his back, the stone floor cold against his skin. His breath came back slowly, though each inhale stung like fire.

Above him, Durn loomed, arms crossed, looking immensely amused.

"Ye always gotta keep watch, Ogar," he said, grinning like a wolf. "Them unexpected punches can be deadly."

Ogar groaned, rolling onto his side. "Ye bloody bastard."

Durn chuckled, offering a hand to help him up. "Lesson learned?"

Ogar grunted, still wincing, but took the hand and pulled himself upright. His stomach still ached, but his pride burned worse.

"Aye," Ogar muttered, rubbing his ribs. "I won't let ye do that again, ye old goat."

Durn grinned. "Good. Then ye might just live long enough to use that sword."

Ogar snorted, grabbing his blade from the floor.

He was tired, his body sore, but the training had been worth it.

Weeks passed.

Ogar settled back into the rhythm of mining, his days once again filled with the clang of pickaxes, the grinding of stone, and the grueling labor of hauling ore.

But from that night forward, he carried his short sword with him every day.

At first, the other miners laughed, calling him "goblin-slayer" and "tunnel knight", but Ogar didn't care. He kept the blade strapped to his belt, its weight a constant reassurance. If another filthy creature lunged at him, it wouldn't get away.

Days turned to weeks, and soon, the memory of the attack faded. There were no further sightings of goblins, no strange noises in the tunnels, nothing but the endless work of chipping away at the mountain's belly.

And so, eventually, even Ogar began to think that perhaps it had been an isolated incident.

Ogar was deep in the mines, his broad shoulders covered in dust, his pickaxe swinging in steady rhythm.

The tunnel he worked in was quiet—most of the others had gone deeper or had taken their break. The air was thick, filled with the scent of damp stone and iron ore.

Then, he heard it.

That same scratching sound.

Soft, at first.

Then louder, accompanied by a low rustling, like clawed feet scuttling over loose rock.

Ogar froze, his grip on the pickaxe tightening.

His breath slowed as his ears strained to listen.

Then—it appeared.

A goblin, its yellow eyes glinting in the lantern light, crawled out from a dark crevice in the tunnel wall.

Ogar's jaw tightened, his hand hovering over his sword hilt.

But this time, the goblin did not attack.

Instead, it grinned, showing its crooked, jagged teeth.

"Mmm… dwarf has gold?" the goblin rasped in its filthy language, tilting its scrawny head.

Ogar blinked, caught off guard. He had never heard one of these wretched creatures speak in anything other than battle cries and curses.

The goblin took a step closer, its long, bony fingers twitching.

"Dwarf have gold. Gold for me, yes? Mmm… a shiny coin, maybe two?"

Ogar narrowed his eyes, his grip tightening around his pickaxe handle.

"What in the pit are ye on about?" he muttered. "I ain't got gold for the likes of ye. Get lost before I run ye through."

The goblin clicked its tongue, baring its yellow teeth in a smile.

"Mmm… dwarf is stingy. Dwarf is greedy." The goblin's blackened claws twitched at its sides. "But goblin… goblin is patient. Goblin is nice. We trade, yes?"

Ogar's brow furrowed. With a filthy cave-rat like this? He let out a harsh laugh, shifting his stance. "Aye, I got a trade fer ye—ye piss off now, and I don't split yer skull open."

The goblin's friendly expression twisted instantly.

Its eyes darkened, its lip curled back, and a low snarl rumbled from its throat.

"Stupid dwarf. Stupid, greedy dwarf. I ask nice. I ask good. Now I take!"

With a shriek, the goblin lunged forward, claws bared, aiming for Ogar's throat.

Ogar reacted on instinct, swinging his pickaxe sideways, slamming it into the goblin's ribs.

The creature yelped, tumbling sideways, but it recovered fast, scrambling low and lunging again, its claws slashing wildly.

Ogar barely had time to dodge, the sharp nails raking across his forearm, drawing blood.

"Ye bastard!" Ogar roared, reaching for his sword.

The goblin pounced, knocking Ogar onto his back, its jagged teeth snapping inches from his face. Its breath was rancid, and its spittle dripped onto Ogar's beard as it shrieked and clawed.

Ogar grunted, his powerful arms grappling the goblin's bony limbs, trying to force it off. The goblin was fast, wild, and unhinged, its mad yellow eyes flickering in the dim lantern glow.

"I tear dwarf's throat! I eat dwarf's heart!" it screeched, its claws slashing wildly.

Ogar growled, using his sheer strength to twist the goblin's arm backward, bending it at an unnatural angle.

The goblin shrieked in pain, but it still kicked wildly, its clawed toes raking against Ogar's ribs.

Ogar roared and threw his full weight forward, slamming the goblin into the stone floor.

It twitched, but before it could scramble away, Ogar grabbed his sword, his fingers wrapping around the hilt like iron.

With a snarl, he drove the blade into the goblin's gut.

The creature howled, its yellow eyes bulging as it convulsed violently, but Ogar wasn't done.

With a guttural roar, he pushed the blade upward, driving it through the goblin's stomach, up into its chest, and straight through its skull.

The point of the sword burst out through the top of the goblin's head, blood spattering across the tunnel floor.

The creature twitched once, twice—then went still.

Ogar panted, his chest heaving, his hands sticky with goblin blood.

He yanked his sword free, watching the lifeless body slump to the stone floor.

For a moment, the only sound was his own breathing.

Then, he spat onto the corpse, wiping his blade on its ragged tunic.

"Told ye I'd run ye through."

He stood there for a moment longer, the iron tang of blood thick in the air.

Then, he turned back toward the main tunnel, his mind racing.

Ogar chuckled to himself as he wiped goblin blood off his sword and onto his breeches.

"Stupid bastard," he muttered, kicking the lifeless body aside before picking up his pickaxe.

He laughed again at the thought—twice now, goblins had come for his throat, and twice now, he had put them down like the wretched little rats they were.

With a grunt, he spat onto the cave floor and went back to work, driving his pickaxe into the tunnel wall.

But as time passed, the thought kept nagging at him.

Where the hells were they coming from?

Ogar paused, wiping the sweat from his brow.

The last goblin had come from behind him, from a darker tunnel, one of the older sections of the mine.

If these things were crawlin' out from somewhere, he'd better damn well know where.

With that, he grabbed a torch from a nearby wall sconce, strapped his short sword tight at his side, and set off down the dark passage.

The tunnel was quiet, save for the distant dripping of water and the occasional scuffle of rats in the shadows.

Ogar's boots echoed against the stone floor as he marched forward, the flame of his torch flickering, casting long, wavering shadows against the craggy walls.

The deeper he went, the more dust and debris covered the ground.

This was an old passage, one that hadn't seen regular use in years—maybe centuries.

Cobwebs hung from the wooden support beams, their once-sturdy frames now cracked and splintered from age.

The air smelled stale, thick with the scent of damp stone and something else… something old.

After what felt like half an hour of walking, the tunnel came to an end—or so it seemed.

Ogar stopped, lifting his torch higher.

Before him stood a sealed-off section of the mine.

Thick wooden boards had been nailed across the entrance, some so old and brittle that they had already begun to rot and collapse.

There was a gap in the middle.

Just enough for something small to squeeze through.

Ogar stared at the opening, rubbing his beard.

"This must be it… this must be where the little bastards are comin' from."

He took a step closer, peering through the dark opening.

A cold wind suddenly rushed from within, slamming into his face like a winter breeze from the deepest mountain caverns.

Ogar shivered, his spine tingling.

Something about that wind felt wrong.

Then—

He saw them.

Eyes.

Deep in the blackness, beyond the ruined boards, a pair of gleaming yellow eyes flickered.

They darted quickly, disappearing before he could get a better look.

Ogar froze, his grip tightening around his torch.

His instincts screamed at him to go no further.

Whatever was in there… it wasn't just one goblin.

Ogar felt a chill creep up his back, and for the first time in a long while, he felt uneasy.

With a final glance at the gaping darkness, he muttered under his breath, turned around, and walked back toward the main tunnels.

The workday dragged on, but Ogar's mind was elsewhere.

Even as he swung his pickaxe, even as he loaded carts full of ore, he kept thinking about the eyes in the dark.

By the time his shift was over, he was ready to leave, his mind filled with unanswered questions.

On his way home, he spotted Brokk standing near the mine entrance, talking with a few other dwarves.

Ogar strolled up, catching his attention.

"Brokk," he grunted.

Brokk turned, rubbing the soot from his forehead. "Ah, Ogar. Ye look like ye seen a ghost."

Ogar crossed his arms, leaning in slightly. "Had another goblin jump me today."

Brokk's bushy brows furrowed. "Another? By the gods, where in the hells are they comin' from?"

Ogar exhaled through his nose, glancing around before answering. "I think it's the old tunnels. Ye know—the ones that were sealed off long ago."

Brokk's expression darkened. "Ye serious?"

"Aye." Ogar nodded. "Went lookin' today. Found an old boarded-up section. But there's a hole big enough for the little bastards to squeeze through."

Weeks turned into months, and Ogar's life fell into its usual rhythm—a cycle of toiling in the mines, drinking at the Golden Beard, resting, smoking hemp, and training under Battlemaster Durn.

But something was different now.

Since that first goblin attack, since that first swordfight, Ogar had begun to feel something new stir inside him.

At first, he had trained only to be prepared, to not be caught unarmed again in the tunnels. But with each lesson, each sparring match, he found himself liking the fight more and more.

He remembered the old lessons from when he was a young recruit, the drills he had once thought were a waste of time, and now they made sense in his hands again. The way a blade moved, the way his stance could change everything, the way a fight was as much about patience as it was about strength.

Durn, ever the gruff taskmaster, took notice.

One evening after a particularly intense sparring session, the old battlemaster tossed a leather-bound book onto the stone bench beside Ogar.

"Take it," he grunted.

Ogar, still catching his breath, picked up the worn book, flipping through its aged pages.

It was a manual of old battles, written by a long-dead dwarven general, detailing techniques of swordplay, strategies of war, and the wisdom of warriors past.

Ogar glanced up, raising an eyebrow. "A gift?"

Durn snorted. "A lesson. Read it. Study it. Ye got a fighter's spirit, Ogar. But brute strength'll only take ye so far. A clever blade outlives a reckless one."

Ogar nodded, tucking the book into his belt, feeling a spark of something new growing within him.

Tunnels

One day, while swinging his pickaxe, covered in dust and sweat, Ogar's mind drifted back to the old tunnels.

The sealed-off entrance, the cold wind, the eyes in the dark.

Something about it wouldn't let go of his thoughts.

After finishing his shift, instead of heading straight back, he took a detour, making his way down the forgotten passage that led to the ancient mine.

As before, the tunnel was silent, filled only with the sound of his own boots against stone and the faint drip of water from the cavern walls.

When he reached the rotting wooden boards, he stopped, lifting his torch.

The gap was still there, a jagged hole just big enough for something small to crawl through.

And then— The eyes. Flickering in the dark. Watching.

Ogar stood his ground, feeling the old chill creep down his spine. He gritted his teeth and let out a low growl. "I ain't afraid of you."

His voice echoed in the tunnel, swallowed by the dark. But as the words left his mouth, he felt it. That deep, unnatural cold. Something whispered beyond the shadows.

The eyes blinked, and then they were gone. Ogar exhaled, shaking off the feeling, but his hands were clenched into fists. Even though he spoke with defiance, there was something about this place that didn't sit right.

He lowered himself onto a flat rock, setting down his torch.

Pulling out his waterskin, he took a long drink, then pulled a hunk of bread from his pouch and began eating slowly, his mind drifting.

As he chewed, he stared at his calloused hands, still dusted with iron ore.

He thought back to twenty years ago, when he had first picked up a miner's axe.

He had been young, strong, but not seasoned. He remembered how heavy the pickaxe had felt in his hands back then, how his muscles had ached in those first months.

He had hated it at first—the endless swinging, the back-breaking work, the never-ending dust and sweat.

But in time, his body had hardened, his arms had grown strong, and the work had become second nature.

Now?

Now he could swing a pickaxe for hours without a second thought.

Now he could carve tunnels into the mountain as if it were second nature.

Now the weight of steel felt natural in his grip—whether it was a tool for work or a weapon for killing.

Ogar sighed, chewing on his bread, staring into the dark hole ahead.

The mines had been his life for twenty years.

Ogar sat on the cold stone, his back against the rough tunnel wall, chewing absentmindedly on his bread. The flickering torch beside him cast dancing shadows across the jagged rock face, its glow barely penetrating the deeper blackness beyond the broken boards. His waterskin hung loose in his other hand, half-drained from his slow sips. He was lost in thought, reflecting on twenty years of back-breaking work, the rhythm of the pickaxe, the weight of steel, and the unshakable sense that something was changing—something unseen, lurking just beyond the reach of his torchlight.

A clicking sound echoed from within the dark passage ahead. At first, he thought it was just the settling of stones or maybe the shifting of old wood from deep within the abandoned mine. But then, it came again. A sharp, rhythmic clicking, not unlike the tapping of claws on rock.

Ogar tensed, pausing mid-chew. His instincts, sharpened over decades of surviving the dangers of the deep tunnels, sent a warning through his gut.

The clicking grew louder.

Then, without warning, a massive cave spider lunged at him from the darkness above, dropping from the ceiling with terrifying speed. Ogar barely had time to react before the beast slammed into him, knocking him flat onto his back. His bread and waterskin flew from his grip, skidding across the rocky ground.

"Fucking hell!" he bellowed, scrambling to free himself as thick, silk-like strands of webbing shot from the spider’s abdomen, wrapping around his legs. The creature was the size of a hound, its chitinous body glistening under the dim torchlight. Eight soulless black eyes gleamed at him, its sharp fangs dripping with venom as it tried to bite down onto his shoulder.

Ogar thrashed, swinging a wild punch into the creature’s face, his knuckles smashing against its hard exoskeleton. The spider hissed, recoiling slightly, but it was relentless, its long, needle-like legs skittering over his body, anchoring him down.

The webbing tightened around his legs, pulling at him, attempting to cocoon him like prey. Ogar grunted, his hands flailing for his sword, fingers brushing against the hilt. His heart pounded. He couldn't let the damn thing drag him into the darkness—he knew what happened to things that were taken alive.

With one final, desperate heave, he tore his arm free from the sticky strands, grasped the hilt of his sword, and with a feral roar, slashed upward.

The blade cut deep into one of the spider’s spindly legs, severing it with a wet crunch. The creature let out an ear-piercing shriek, rearing back in agony. Seizing the moment, Ogar rolled to the side, ripping himself free from some of the webbing, but the damn thing was still on him.

Then—pain.

A sharp, searing stab in his thigh as the spider sank its venomous fangs deep into his flesh. A white-hot burning sensation spread instantly, and Ogar felt his limbs grow heavy, his vision swimming.

"No…" he gritted out, gripping his sword tighter, forcing his body to move through the paralyzing pain. His muscles screamed, his head pounded, but he wasn't going to die here.

The spider lunged at him again, fangs bared for another bite, but Ogar swung his blade in a desperate arc, slicing across its underbelly. Thick, black ichor sprayed onto the stone floor as the creature screamed and convulsed, legs thrashing wildly.

Ogar didn't stop. With the last of his strength, he drove his sword forward, thrusting it through the spider’s open maw, piercing through its skull and deep into its brain.

The creature shuddered violently, letting out one last horrid screech, before its twitching legs curled inward, its lifeless body collapsing beside him.

Ogar lay on his back, panting, sweating, and shaking, his limbs already numb from the venom. He could barely move, his vision darkening at the edges. He knew the poison was working fast—if he didn’t get help soon, he might not wake up again.

He forced himself to roll onto his stomach, dragging his body forward, clawing at the ground with every ounce of willpower he had left.

The journey back up the tunnel was a blur. His mind drifted in and out, the venom clouding his senses, his muscles barely obeying him.

His breath came in ragged gasps, his entire body trembling as he half-crawled, half-stumbled his way out of the passage. The tunnel seemed endless, stretching on far longer than it should have, but he pushed through, his body running on sheer stubbornness and dwarven fury.

Then, distant voices.

"Ogar?! What in the gods' names happened to ye?!"

Rough hands grabbed him, holding him up as his legs finally gave out. His head lolled to the side, catching a glimpse of familiar faces—miners, his crew.

"Spider… big… bastardin' thing…" he mumbled, barely able to form words before his world went dark.

When Ogar woke, he was lying on a thick wooden cot, the dim glow of a hearth fire flickering nearby. The air was thick with the scent of crushed herbs, and the familiar murmuring voice of an old dwarf woman reached his ears.

"Bah, ye stubborn fool. Nearly got yerself killed."

His eyes blinked open, and he was met with the wrinkled scowl of Mara, the village herbalist, a tough old dwarf who had been tending to the sick longer than anyone could remember.

"What happened?" Ogar croaked, his throat dry.

Mara scoffed. "Big spider bit ye. Poison nearly stopped yer heart. Ye're lucky they got ye here fast enough, else ye'd be stiff as a damned statue."

She reached over and pushed a thick mug of steaming liquid into his hands. "Drink. Antidote."

Ogar took a shaky sip, wincing at the bitter taste, but he downed it all. His limbs still ached, and his thigh was bandaged tightly, but at least the burning had started to fade.

Mara huffed, crossing her arms. "That leg'll be swollen fer days. No work for ye fer a while, unless ye want it fallin' off."

Ogar grunted, rubbing his face. "Could've been worse."

"Aye. Ye could be dead." Mara narrowed her eyes at him. "Now, rest. And try not to go crawlin' into spider dens again, ye daft bastard."

Ogar chuckled weakly, letting his head fall back onto the pillow.

He had won the fight.

Ogar spent the next few days at home, resting as the antidote worked its magic. The swelling in his leg went down faster than expected, and the pain eased, thanks to the careful hands of Mara, the herbalist.

By the fourth day, he felt like himself again. He stretched his stiff limbs, tested his leg with a few careful steps, and nodded to himself. He wasn't one for idleness, and now that he had bested both goblin and spider, there was only one thing left to do—celebrate properly.

That night, he headed to the Golden Beard Tavern, where Tormli and Brokk were already seated at their usual table, tankards in hand, faces flushed with ale.

As soon as they saw Ogar stride through the doors, they raised their mugs, grinning wide.

"Ah, there he is!" Brokk roared. "The mighty goblin-slayer! The butcher of spiders!"

Ogar let out a booming laugh, clapping a hand on his friend's shoulder as he dropped into a chair. "Aye, aye, let's hear it then. Sing me a song o' my own glory!"

Tormli smiled, lifting his half-full tankard of Darkbane. "A song? Hah! We'll need a whole damned orchestra to capture the image o' Ogar rollin' around in spider webs, squealin' like a stuck pig!"

Brokk nearly spit out his drink, laughing. "Aye, and let's not forget the part where the great warrior Ogar spent the night moanin' in bed while old Mara rubbed herbs on his swollen leg!"

Ogar grinned through his scowl, grabbing his own tankard from the serving wench and raising it high. "Laugh all ye want, ye bastards! But at least I'm drinkin' here tonight and not rottin' in some spider's belly!"

"Aye, that's fair," Tormli admitted, taking a deep swig of his ale. "To Ogar the Unwebbed!"

"To Ogar the Undigested!" Brokk added, and all three dwarves clanked their tankards together, guzzling their drinks as the tavern roared with laughter and drunken cheer.

The night carried on in raucous merriment, with Darkbane flowing freely, the thick, throat-burning liquor making its way from mug to belly in quick succession.

Between gulps, Ogar recounted the tale of his encounters, his hands waving wildly as he described the goblin's twisted little face, the way the cave spider nearly wrapped him up like a feast-day roast, and how he had crawled out of the tunnels half-dead only to be dragged to the herbalist like a sack of potatoes.

For a moment, they sat in silence, the din of the tavern buzzing around them, but before the talk could turn too serious, something caught Ogar's eye—a dwarf sitting alone in the corner, a sour look on his face, a mug in hand but barely touched.

And most importantly—he had no beard.

It was rare—almost unheard of—to see a full-grown dwarf without a proper, thick beard. Dwarves took pride in their beards, their length and braiding styles often telling of their age, status, and even clan ties.

But this poor bastard sat miserably alone, his chin as bare as a shaved human's arse, the stubble of uneven patches barely growing back.

From a few tables over, a group of rowdy dwarves nudged each other, pointing and chuckling.

"Oi, Blok!" one of them called, barely holding back laughter. "Ye **forget to water yer beard this mornin'? Looks like it up and ran away!"

The beardless dwarf, Blok, glowered into his drink, his face turning red. "Go piss in yer own ale, Fargol."

"Bah!" another dwarf chimed in. "Leave the poor bastard alone! It ain't his fault he tried to kiss a furnace!"

The table erupted in laughter, smacking the wood as Blok groaned and rubbed his smooth chin.

Ogar leaned forward, amused. "What's his story?" he muttered to Tormli.

Tormli grinned, leaning in conspiratorially. "Ah, that's Blok, poor bastard. Used to have a fine beard—not as grand as mine, mind ye, but a respectable one."

Brokk nodded. "Aye, 'til he got too close to the forge one day and poof!" He made a flourishing gesture, mimicking the burst of flames. "His beard went up like a torch!"

Ogar snorted into his ale. "By the gods…"

Tormli smiled, lowering his voice. "Now, he drinks his weight in Darkbane every night, hopin' the alcohol'll help it grow back faster."

Ogar shook his head, grinning. "A dwarf without a beard… must feel like a warrior without an axe."

Brokk chuckled, then shouted across the tavern, "Oi, Blok! If ye drink enough, maybe ye'll wake up with a mustache at least!"

More laughter erupted, but Blok simply grumbled into his ale, shaking his head in defeat.

Ogar raised his mug, smiling. "To beards, then. May they never meet an open flame!"

"To beards!" Tormli and Brokk roared, and the tavern clanked their mugs together, merriment filling the stone walls once more.

The next morning, Ogar woke feeling the familiar weight of ale in his skull. The night at the Golden Beard had been long and filled with laughter, but now it was back to the real world—the toil, the sweat, and the stone.

Grumbling as he rolled out of bed, he went through his morning routine: a quick rinse with cold water, a hunk of stale bread and dried meat, and then he buckled his belt, making sure his short sword hung at his side. He had been carrying it every day since the goblin attack, and he wasn't about to stop now.

Within the hour, he was deep underground, back in the tunnels, doing what he had done for twenty years—swinging his pickaxe, repairing old wooden supports, and carting out chunks

of iron ore. The rhythm of work was familiar, steady, and even after all these years, there was something comforting in it.

But his thoughts wandered.

His mind drifted back to the old tunnels, to the gap in the wooden boards, to the eyes in the dark. He had brushed the feeling off before, told himself that it was just curiosity, but the thought wouldn't leave him alone.

He had to know.

What was beyond that passage?

What else had been left behind in those ancient tunnels?

He looked around, checking to see if anyone was watching. The other miners were busy, their backs turned, their pickaxes ringing against stone.

This was his chance.

Taking a deep breath, he grabbed a spare torch, lit it, and slipped away into the deeper tunnels.

The silence hit him immediately.

Unlike the bustling work tunnels, here it was dead quiet. The only sounds were the distant dripping of water and the occasional creak of wooden supports that had long since begun to decay.

Ogar soon reached the old sealed entrance. The gap in the wooden boards looked even darker than before, like a gaping mouth waiting to swallow him whole.

For a moment, he hesitated.

Was this a mistake?

He clenched his fists, banishing the doubt from his mind. He had come this far—he wasn't about to turn back now.

With a grunt, he squeezed himself through the opening, the rough wood scraping against his back.

Beyond the entrance, the air was stale and cold, and the dust was so thick it clung to his beard. He held up his torch, letting the flickering light reveal the passage ahead.

As he walked, his boots crunched over loose stone and debris, the walls damp and cracked from centuries of neglect.

Then, something caught his eye.

Carvings in the rock.

He stepped closer, running his calloused fingers over the markings. Names—old dwarven names. Some he recognized from history, others were unknown to him, but they were miners, like him.

They had worked here long before his time.

He exhaled slowly. How long had these tunnels been abandoned? A thousand years? Two?

Further ahead, his torchlight revealed a small chamber, its ceiling held up by thick wooden beams, though some had begun to crack and sag.

Inside, dust-covered mining tools were scattered on the floor, rusted pickaxes and broken helmets left where they had been abandoned centuries ago.

Ogar grinned when he spotted a copper helmet lying on a crate. He picked it up, brushing away the dust, and placed it onto his head, chuckling to himself.

"Aye, that’s a fine look, Ogar. Might start a new fashion."

The helmet was too light, too dented to be worth anything, but he kept it on for amusement’s sake as he turned his attention to the old wooden crates stacked in the corner.

He pried one open with his sword, half-expecting it to be filled with nothing but rotten wood and dust, but to his surprise, he found something else entirely.

Inside were pieces of old mining gear, some half-rotted, others still intact. He lifted a worn leather armor, its surface cracked but still sturdy. The stitching was fine, the kind of work that only old dwarven craftsmen knew how to do.

"Hah. A trophy."

He shrugged it on, rolling his shoulders to test the fit. It wasn’t perfect, but it would do for now.

Then, at the bottom of the crate, he spotted a few silver nuggets—small, but valuable.

"Well, well. Finders keepers."

He pocketed them, grinning to himself. It wasn’t much, but it was better than walking away empty-handed.

He sat on an overturned crate, his torch resting on a nearby stone, and took a moment to think.

The tunnel stretched further beyond this room, leading into more darkness, deeper into the forgotten veins of the mountain.

Something inside him wanted to keep going, to see what else lay hidden in the shadows.

But another part of him—the rational part—reminded him that he was alone. No one knew he was here. If he got lost or if something found him first, there'd be no one to drag him out.

He rubbed his beard, thinking.

Should he go back and return with Brokk or Tormli? Or should he press forward, trusting his instincts?

For now, he simply sat, staring into the dark passage ahead, the flickering torchlight dancing along the stone walls, wondering what secrets the old tunnels still held.

Ogar shifted on the crate, exhaling a deep breath before turning his attention back to the scattered old mining supplies. His torch cast flickering light across the dust-covered crates, their edges warped with time, their contents forgotten in the darkness of the sealed-off tunnels. He pried another one open, his calloused fingers digging through old tools, scraps of cloth, and rusted metal.

Then, something caught his eye.

A piece of old parchment, rolled tightly, wedged beneath a broken pickaxe.

Frowning, he carefully pulled it out, brushing off the layer of dust and grime before unrolling it slowly. The paper was yellowed with age, its edges frayed, but the dark lines drawn in charcoal were still clear.

A map.

Ogar's heart beat faster as he examined it. The roughly sketched tunnels, the markings of passages, and even some old dwarven script scribbled along the edges—this was a map of the ancient tunnel system. At least, a part of it.

He ran a finger over the crude lines, tracing the paths. It wasn't entirely detailed, but it showed at least some of what lay beyond these forgotten halls.

"By the gods…" he muttered.

This was a valuable find. If he could make sense of it, he might be able to navigate the deeper sections of the tunnels.

A slow grin spread across his face. He tucked the map into his belt pouch and stood.

His curiosity burned hotter than ever.

He had to go a little further.

Just a short distance.

He studied the charcoal markings again, deciding on his next steps. According to the map, if he followed the main passage just a bit further, there was a leftward tunnel leading into another chamber.

That would be his next stop.

He gripped his torch tightly, adjusted the leather jacket he had claimed as a trophy, and stepped forward, venturing deeper into the darkness.

The air grew colder as he pressed forward, the silence of the tunnels surrounding him like a thick, suffocating blanket. His own footsteps echoed faintly off the walls, the soft crunch of loose stone beneath his boots the only sound in the vast emptiness.

The old tunnel twisted slightly, and as he rounded a bend, the flickering torchlight revealed something unexpected—traces of old copper and silver veins still embedded in the walls.

Ogar stopped for a moment, running his fingers over the rough stone, feeling the cold metal beneath his touch.

Even after all these years, the veins still gleamed faintly, untouched, left behind when the miners had been forced to abandon this place.

As he walked on, he began to notice another change in the tunnel walls. The rough-hewn mining tunnels gave way to something older, something more deliberate—the work of dwarven stonecraft.

Pillars, simple yet sturdy, rose from the ground to the low ceiling, their edges adorned with faint carvings. The patterns were worn and weathered, but Ogar recognized the marks of the old mining guilds, the craftsmen who had shaped these tunnels ages ago.

“They did their work with care, even in the deep places,” he muttered, running a hand along one of the pillars. The stone was smooth, solid, the touch of skilled hands still evident after all these years.

It was quiet here—too quiet.

The air was still, almost unnaturally so, as if the mountain itself was holding its breath.

Following the directions from the map, he soon arrived at the intersection where the tunnel split off to the left.

Ogar stopped, gripping his torch higher, the flames dancing against the rock walls.

The left passage was narrower, more confined. Unlike the main tunnel, this one seemed less traveled, less worked. The air was colder here, the darkness thicker, almost pressing in around him.

For a moment, he hesitated.

He had come far enough, hadn’t he? He had found the map, the armor, even silver nuggets—wasn’t that enough?

His rational mind told him to turn back.

But his gut, his dwarven instincts, told him to press on.

He stood there for a long moment, breathing deeply, staring into the blackness of the side passage, the old pillars standing like silent guardians around him.

Then, tightening his grip on his torch, he took his first step into the unknown.

Ogar stepped into the stone chamber, his boots kicking up a thin layer of dust that had settled over the centuries. The air was thick and stale, filled with the scent of aged stone, old wood, and something deeper, something long undisturbed.

His torchlight flickered, casting long shadows across the room, revealing furniture—simple but well-crafted. Against the far wall stood a wooden table, its surface still cluttered with knives, bowls, and other small objects, as if the last ones who sat here had simply gotten up and never returned. Two beds rested near the side wall, made of piled furs and dust-covered blankets, the indentations of past sleepers long faded.

He coughed, the ancient dust tickling his throat, and waved a hand through the air, stirring up more of the fine, powdery residue of time.

“Looks like someone lived here once,” he muttered to himself, running a hand over the worn surface of the table, his fingers tracing the patterns of use, the faint scratches of knives and cups long abandoned.

His eyes landed on a small shelf, its contents barely holding together from rot and age. Among the crumbling wood sat three old books, their leather covers cracked but mostly intact.

Ogar pulled the first one free, blowing off the dust, revealing the faded title burned into the cover.

"A Guide to Mountain Herbs and Their Uses."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Well now, Mara might get a kick outta this one," he muttered, flipping through the aged parchment pages. The book contained illustrations of herbs, their uses carefully listed in old dwarven script.

He scanned the section on medicinal plants, his finger running over a passage that caught his eye:

"The greenleaf hemp, found in low mountain valleys, has been prized by dwarves for its many properties. When smoked, it calms the nerves, clears the mind, and allows deep thought. Some say it even opens the mind to visions beyond the waking world. When ground into a paste, it can soothe wounds, reducing swelling and pain. However, too much use dulls the wits and leads to laziness, a weakness not suited for a proper dwarven worker."

"The firewort plant, found near volcanic vents, is known for its intense heat. Its leaves can be brewed into a tea that warms the body, useful in deep cold tunnels, but in high doses, it causes the heart to race like a hammer on an anvil."

"The nightbloom fungus grows only in the deepest caverns, its pale glow lighting the paths of those lost. It is said that long ago, miners followed these fungi to hidden riches—but also to dangers lurking in the abyss. Some claim it carries the whispers of the deep, and should be eaten only by the bold or the foolish."

Ogar chuckled. "Hemp's got that right—calms the nerves, sure enough. Mara'll appreciate the part about lazy dwarves."

He tucked the herb book into his belt pouch and reached for the second book.

"A Proper Dwarf's Guide to Beard Grooming."

Ogar barked out a laugh, shaking his head. "Ah, now here's one fer old Blok. Might help the poor bastard grow back what he lost."

He tossed it onto the table, not bothering to carry it with him—not much use to him, since his own beard was already thick and fine as ever.

The third book had him chuckling again. "Dwarven Soups and Breads: A Collection of Time-Honored Recipes."

"Of course. Leave it to old dwarves to write whole books about what to dip in ale," he muttered, flipping a few pages to see illustrations of thick bread loaves, hearty stew pots, and ingredients that he had barely thought about before beyond shoving into his mouth after a long shift.

He chuckled again and set it aside. "Not exactly a book o' battle tactics, but I suppose even the dead need to eat."

His attention shifted to the wooden chest tucked against the back of the room. It was sturdy, reinforced with iron bands, but age had left it warped, its hinges rusted.

Ogar knelt, resting his sword against his leg, and pried the lid open.

Inside, a pile of old cutlery, dull and corroded by time, clinked together. Rusty knives, bent spoons, and dented tankards—nothing that was worth much, but he rummaged through them anyway, just in case.

Then, his fingers closed around something smooth.

He pulled it free.

A bottle of ancient dwarven wine, its label faded, but the seal still unbroken.

Ogar grinned.

"Now here’s a prize."

He uncorked it, lifting the bottle to his nose, sniffing cautiously. The scent was strong, sweet, with a hint of spice—aged well, untouched by time.

He didn’t hesitate.

Lifting the bottle to his lips, he took a long, deep drink.

The wine was warm, rich, coating his throat in a bold, fiery flavor, sending an instant heat through his chest.

"By the gods," he muttered, tilting his head back and draining the whole bottle in one sitting. It burned pleasantly, the way only a well-aged dwarven vintage could.

He let out a contented sigh, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, the warmth settling deep into his bones.

For the first time since he had entered these old tunnels, he allowed himself to relax, just for a moment.

He pulled the herb book from his pouch again, flipping lazily through the pages, reading about the strange plants of the mountain, letting the wine loosen his thoughts.

Maybe there was nothing to fear here after all.

Maybe these tunnels were just what they seemed—the remnants of another time, left behind by miners just like him, long dead but still present in the scratched names on the walls, the tools and books they left behind, the furniture covered in dust but still standing as if waiting for their owners to return.

He leaned back against the side of the chest, his eyes flickering over the map he had found.

"Just a little further," he murmured to himself.

Ogar let out a loud, satisfied burp, the rich dwarven wine warming his belly, leaving behind a pleasant buzz in his head. He smacked his lips, staring at the map in his hand, its charcoal markings now slightly smudged from his fingers and sweat. He traced the next section of the tunnels, debating his next move.

"Aye, just a bit further," he muttered to himself, rolling up the map and tucking it back into his pouch. "Ain’t found nothin’ worth real trouble yet."

His torchlight flickered against the stone walls as he pressed forward, stepping carefully over the uneven ground, his boots crunching over loose pebbles and old debris.

The air was stale, untouched for who knew how many years, yet something about this place still felt alive—not with people, but with history, with the ghosts of old dwarven hands that had shaped these tunnels long before his time.

Then, another doorway emerged from the darkness ahead.

Ogar ducked his broad shoulders slightly to step through the arched stone doorway into the chamber, the dusty air thick and choking. He coughed as he waved his torch around, illuminating the cluttered room before him.

Shelves lined the walls, their wood warped from age, holding scattered tools, rusted nails, and broken equipment. Against one side of the room stood a weapon rack, filled with long-forgotten swords, their blades dull, their edges eaten by rust.

On the stone floor, a dented helmet lay abandoned, its surface scratched and worn, as if it had been cast aside in haste or battle. Ogar nudged it with his boot, but it was too damaged to be of use.

His eyes moved toward the wooden crates, stacked and half-toppled, their lids either missing or barely holding together.

"Let’s see what ye got," he muttered, setting his torch into an iron wall bracket before grabbing the nearest crate lid and prying it open.

Inside were scattered pieces of armor—plates of iron and steel, but in such disarray that he had no idea which parts matched with which. Some leg guards were thrown in with shoulder pieces, old gauntlets were tangled with rusted chainmail, and some plates were bent out of shape entirely.

Ogar grunted, rummaging through them for a few moments before sighing and throwing the metal pieces back in.

"Bah, whoever packed this was a damn fool."

He moved to another crate, this one sturdier, but stacked high on a shelf. He frowned, then pushed one of the smaller crates beneath it, stepping on top to get a better view.

There, resting in a thin layer of dust, he saw it.

A helmet, still intact.

Unlike the rusted and dented ones, this one was sturdy, its surface worn but still usable. He brushed off the dust, running his fingers over the engraved ridges before pulling it over his head. It fit snugly, settling into place with the weight of something meant to last.

He grinned, giving it a light tap. "Aye, that’ll do."

Continuing his search, Ogar’s eyes landed on a pair of gloves resting on a worktable, covered in dust and cobwebs. They were leather, but reinforced with metal engravings along the knuckles and forearms, meant for hard labor—or a fight.

He picked them up, shaking off the dust, and pulled them onto his hands.

The leather was stiff, but with some wear, they’d become as good as new.

"Now these, these I'll keep," he muttered, flexing his fingers, feeling the solid weight of the metal plates over his knuckles.

Then his eyes landed on one last crate, this one sealed tighter than the others. He tried to lift the lid, but it was stuck fast.

Ogar scowled. "Damn stubborn thing…"

He grabbed his short sword, wedging the blade between the cracks of the wooden lid, using his weight to pry it open.

The wood groaned, then splintered apart, the crate snapping open with a loud crack.

Inside, nestled among old rags, were leather boots reinforced with metal plates—sturdy, well-crafted, and far better than the dusty work boots he had on now.

"Hah! Now we're talkin'!" Ogar said, pulling the boots out. He gave them a once-over, knocked the dust from them, and set them aside.

Then, his eyes caught something else at the bottom of the crate—a small cloth bag, tied shut with an old leather cord.

With a satisfied nod, he grabbed the bag, stuffed the boots, gloves, and helmet inside, and slung it over his shoulder.

Turning, he glanced around the chamber once more, and that was when he saw it—the anvil.

In the far corner of the room, next to a long-cold furnace, sat a large iron anvil, its surface worn with age, surrounded by scattered smithing tools—hammers, tongs, chisels.

Ogar took a step closer, running a hand over the anvil's cool surface.

"This must've been a smith's shop," he muttered to himself, taking in the sight of the old forge, now filled with dust and silence.

Once, these tools had shaped armor and weapons, had forged the gear of miners and warriors alike. But now, they were forgotten, just like everything else in these tunnels.

A strange sense of respect settled over him.

He wasn't a smith, never had been, but he understood the work, the craft. Whoever had labored here had been skilled, had been part of something greater, before time swallowed them whole.

With a final glance around, he tightened his grip on his loot and exhaled.

Ogar stood in the center of the dusty old smith's shop, adjusting the weight of his bag filled with newly found loot. He had done well—armor, a map, even a bottle of wine he had already drained. But as the thrill of discovery settled, a heavy silence crept into the room.

Then, he heard it.

Scratching. Rustling.

A soft shuffling noise echoed from the tunnel outside. Then—nothing.

His heart hammered in his chest, his grip tightened around the bag's strap, and a sharp thought ran through his mind.

Damn it. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to come here alone.

The darkness around him felt different now—thicker, deeper, almost alive. The edges of the torchlight barely held back the shadows, and in those shadows, something was waiting.

A single drop of water echoed as it fell from the ceiling, landing somewhere in the distance. The air was cold, unnaturally so, and as Ogar exhaled, he saw his breath misting in the air.

The old tunnels were breathing with him.

Then, the sound came again.

Soft footsteps. Bare feet against stone.

Not an animal. Something was walking.

Ogar's hands moved on instinct, reaching into his bag for the helmet he had just looted. If he was about to fight, he damn well wasn't going to do it bareheaded.

He lifted the helmet, sliding it over his head—

Then—

Screams from the dark!

Three goblins erupted from the shadows, their jagged teeth bared, their clawed hands gripping rusted knives and crude clubs.

"Dwarf-flesh! Mine! Mine!" one of them screeched.

"Kill! Kill the intruder!" another howled, its yellow eyes gleaming with malice.

Ogar barely had time to pull his sword free before the first goblin was on him.

The first goblin came in low and fast, slashing wildly with a rusty dagger. Ogar sidestepped, his thick boots scraping against the stone floor, and swung his short sword in a wide arc, barely missing the creature's scrawny neck.

The second goblin leaped from the side, swinging a wooden club with iron nails jutting from the top.

Ogar ducked.

The club whistled past his head, smashing into a shelf, sending old tools and rusted weapons clattering to the floor.

The third goblin took advantage of the moment and lunged from behind, sinking its claws into Ogar’s back, trying to drag him down.

Pain flared up his spine, and he roared in anger, gripping the goblin’s arm and hurling it forward, sending the creature crashing into a pile of old crates.

The first goblin came at him again, stabbing with its wicked little dagger.

This time, Ogar didn’t dodge.

Instead, he lunged forward, catching the goblin’s wrist in a vice grip, twisting it until he heard a sickening snap.

The goblin screeched, its knife falling from its limp fingers.

Ogar didn't hesitate—he drove his sword into the creature’s stomach, feeling the blade punch through flesh and bone, warm goblin blood splattering against his arm.

The goblin gurgled, eyes bulging, its mouth twitching in a final attempt to curse him, but Ogar twisted the blade upward, and the creature went limp, sliding off his sword onto the floor. One down.

The second goblin, seeing its comrade fall, snarled and rushed in, swinging its nail-studded club. Ogar blocked with his sword, sparks flying as the club’s iron spikes scraped against steel.

The goblin swung again, but Ogar caught its arm, yanked it forward, and slammed his helmeted head into the goblin’s face.

CRACK!

The goblin staggered back, clutching its shattered nose, blood dripping between its fingers. Before it could recover, Ogar stepped in close, ramming his blade deep into the creature’s chest, twisting it before ripping it free, sending another spray of black blood onto the cold stone floor. Two down.

The third goblin, the one that had clawed at his back, was already on its feet, its yellow eyes wide with rage and terror. It let out a guttural scream, lunging forward with wild, flailing swings.

Ogar dodged one slash, parried the next, then countered with a savage punch, his metal-plated glove connecting with the goblin’s jaw with a sickening crunch. The goblin stumbled, but it was desperate, and it lunged at Ogar's throat, snapping its jagged teeth like a rabid animal.

Ogar gritted his teeth, driving his knee into the goblin's gut, forcing the creature to double over, coughing up blood.

He grabbed the goblin's greasy hair, yanked its head back, and with a final growl, drove his sword straight through the creature's open mouth, impaling it through the back of the skull.

The goblin's body went rigid, its twitching limbs jerking uncontrollably before finally falling still.

Ogar stood over the pile of bodies, his chest heaving, his arms and armor dripping with goblin blood.

His hands trembled slightly from the adrenaline, from the kill, from the fact that he had just fought for his life in a tomb of the past, with no one around to help him if he had failed.

He wiped the blade of his sword on the nearest goblin's rags, exhaling sharply.

"Well… damn."

Ogar wiped the last traces of goblin blood from his sword, his breathing still heavy from the fight. His heart was pounding, not just from exertion, but from the creeping realization that he had pushed his luck too far this time.

He let out a long breath, looking down at the three slain goblins, their bodies already cooling on the stone floor. "That's enough fer one damn day," he muttered.

Sheathing his sword, he grabbed his bag, adjusted the weight of it over his shoulder, and turned back, heading toward the exit of the old mine.

The tunnels stretched before him, dark and silent once more. Only the sound of his own boots crunching against the stone reminded him that he was still alive, still walking away from whatever else lurked in these depths.

At times, he stopped, holding his breath, listening. Nothing. No scratching. No whispers. No bare feet on stone. Still, he felt it—the weight of something unseen, something that watched from the deep places.

More than once, he glanced over his shoulder, his fingers twitching near his sword hilt, ready for another ambush. But there was nothing there, just darkness swallowing his footprints.

When he finally saw the broken boards of the entrance, he let out a grunt of relief.

Stepping through the gap, back into the main mines, was like stepping into another world—one of the living, of the working, of the familiar sounds of pickaxes ringing, carts rolling, and dwarves grumbling over their shifts.

He was back.

Before heading home, Ogar made a quick stop at his work spot, where his pickaxe was still leaning against a crate.

He tugged off the leather armor jacket, rolled it up, and placed it into his bag alongside the helmet. These things weren't exactly easy to explain, and for now, he wasn't in the mood for too many questions.

With his bag tucked safely away, he grabbed his pickaxe, swung it over his shoulder, and for the next hour, he actually did some real work—hacking at the rock, moving ore, reinforcing beams—just enough to make sure nobody wondered where the hell he had disappeared to.

After a while, satisfied that his absence hadn't been noticed, he finally called it a day and headed home.

On his way back, he spotted Tormli, standing near a supply cart, chewing on a strip of dried meat. The stocky dwarf lifted a brow as Ogar approached.

"Yer lookin' a bit scuffed up," Tormli said, eyeing the scratches on Ogar's arms and the faint streaks of dried blood on his work tunic.

"Bah, nothin'," Ogar grunted. "Got into a bit of trouble."

Tormli chuckled, taking another bite of meat. "Aye, sounds like a normal day fer you. What kind of 'trouble'?"

Ogar hesitated, then shrugged. "Went back to that sealed-off mine."

Tormli stopped chewing. His expression darkened. "The hells did ye do that fer?"

Ogar crossed his arms. "There's rooms down there. Old gear, weapons, even some books. Feels like the place was lived in once."

Tormli rubbed his beard, frowning. "Aye… and did ye ever stop to think why it's sealed off? Ye think some old dwarf just forgot about a whole mine? There's a reason we don't dig there anymore."

Ogar snorted. "Aye, I figured that out when the goblins jumped me."

Tormli cursed under his breath. "You daft bastard. Ye went in alone?"

Ogar shrugged. "Killed 'em."

Tormli shook his head, muttering something about foolish miners and stubborn dwarves. "Look, Ogar. Ye might think ye got lucky today, but that place was shut for a reason. Ye don't just waltz back into history and expect it to sit quiet."

Ogar sighed, knowing his friend was half-right, but he also knew that curiosity would get the better of him again.

Still, he grunted a farewell and left it at that.

Once home, Ogar took the rare opportunity to clean up.

He sat at his small wooden table, pulled out his comb, and ran it through his thick, dark beard, working out the knots of the day. He split it into two thick pigtails, tying them neatly with leather bands, then took a small jar of plant oil, rubbing a bit of it through his beard, letting the earthy scent fill his nose.

A well-kept beard was an honorable thing, and after a long day of digging, fighting, and looting, he figured he deserved a bit of dignity back.

After eating a hearty meal of bread, cheese, and a bit of smoked meat, he grabbed the herbal book he had found in the abandoned tunnels and made his way to Mara's shop.

Mara's small dwelling was filled with the smell of dried herbs, the air thick with the scents of rosemary, thyme, and strange roots Ogar didn't recognize.

The old herbalist squinted at him when he entered, eyeing him up and down. "Yer lookin' less dead than last time."

"Aye, thanks to yer potions," Ogar said with a grin, placing the old book on her table.

Mara glanced at it, then back at him. "What's this?"

"Old book on mountain herbs and their uses. Found it in a… let's say, forgotten place. Figured ye'd have more use for it than the dust it was sittin' under."

The old woman ran her fingers over the leather cover, her eyes narrowing in interest. After flipping through the aged pages, her expression softened, and for the first time in years, she actually looked pleased.

"Ye did good, Ogar," she said, nodding in approval. "There's knowledge here that's been lost fer a long time."

She stepped away, rummaging through a small chest, and pulled out two vials of thick red liquid, placing them in his hands.

"Fer yer trouble," she said. "Healing potions—good ones. Ye take a wound, ye drink. Simple as that."

Ogar smiled. "I like simple."

She waved him off. "Now get outta me shop. I got readin' to do."

Ogar chuckled, tucking the vials into his pouch, and made his way back home.

Ogar had a few days off from the mines, and as much as he enjoyed his drinking, resting, and training, his thoughts kept drifting back to the old tunnels. He had seen rooms, forgotten gear, even an abandoned forge, and something told him there was more hidden beneath the mountain—more than just dust and goblins.

He had a choice: stay in comfort or venture once more into the past.

It wasn’t much of a decision.

By midday, he was gearing up at his usual work spot, donning the helmet, the leather armor jacket, the sturdy boots, and the engraved gloves he had recovered from the old mine. He buckled his sword to his hip, grabbed a torch, and once again, stood before the sealed-off entrance.

This time, there was no hesitation.

Ogar squeezed through the gap in the wooden boards, and as soon as he stepped into the forgotten tunnels, the weight of silence returned.

He pulled out the charcoal-drawn map, eyes scanning the faded pathways.

"Back to the armor room first," he muttered.

His boots echoed in the tunnel as he retraced his steps, passing the old pillars and silver-veined walls, following the route he had taken before.

Soon enough, he arrived at the armory chamber. The crates, the weapon racks, the abandoned smith’s tools—everything was as he had left it.

He pulled the map out again, running a finger along the tunnels ahead.

Last time, he had gone left. This time, he would go right.

Ogar pressed deeper into the unknown passage, the air growing thicker, colder. The old walls were lined with faint carvings, the work of long-dead hands, detailing scenes of dwarves in their everyday lives—miners, smiths, warriors, drinkers.

The further he walked, the more he realized that this place wasn’t just a mine—it had been a home.

Then, his torchlight flickered across something larger.

He stepped through a stone archway, and before him stretched a massive chamber. Ogar’s eyebrows lifted.

Long wooden tables, though rotted and broken in places, were still lined up in rows. Thick oak chairs, some toppled over, sat scattered about. A large oak counter stretched across the far side of the room, and behind it, shelves lined with dusty bottles and kegs stood against the wall.

It took him a moment to realize what he was looking at. "By the gods… this was a tavern."

The old dwarves hadn’t just worked in these tunnels. They had lived here. Drank here. Laughed here.

He could almost hear their ghostly voices, the echo of mugs slamming against tables, the deep songs of miners celebrating a hard day’s labor.

He grinned. "Aye… now this is a proper dwarven find."

Ogar stepped behind the bar, running his gloved fingers over the counter, knocking away centuries of dust. The shelves were mostly empty, but a few glass bottles remained, their contents long dried up.

Then, his eyes landed on an old keg, the wood aged but still sealed. "Hah. Let's see what ye've got left."

He pried it open, the faint pop of air escaping, and inside was a dark, thick liquid, its surface glistening faintly. He sniffed it.

The scent was strong—a mix of fermented grain and something… else.

"Smells like spirits," he muttered, grabbing a metal tankard from the bar. He dipped it in, filling it with the mysterious brew, then lifted it to his lips and drank deeply.

The moment the liquid hit his tongue, warmth spread through his chest, a fiery burn traveling straight to his belly.

He coughed, then grinned.

"By the gods, that's strong."

With a contented sigh, he took another deep drink, then slammed the empty mug onto the counter, letting out a loud, satisfied burp that echoed through the empty chamber.

"Now that is what I call a find," he muttered, shaking his head as the warmth spread to his limbs.

Feeling relaxed, Ogar settled onto one of the old chairs, pulling out his pipe. He packed it with hemp, struck a flint, and soon, thick gray smoke curled into the air, mixing with the musty scent of the ancient tavern.

He pulled the map from his pouch, unrolling it onto the dusty table before him.

He had already memorized some of the passages. His mind was starting to form a picture, connecting the old miners' living quarters, the forge, the armory, and now, the tavern.

"Place is bigger than I thought," he muttered, exhaling a cloud of smoke, his vision swimming slightly from the drink.

For a while, he simply sat, enjoying the quiet, feeling the warmth of the drink, the comfort of the old stone walls around him.

Without thinking, he started to hum a tune, one his father had sung long ago, a tune passed down from miners to warriors to drinkers alike.

His rough voice carried softly in the empty chamber, the words spilling out without effort.

"Deep in the halls where the stone runs deep,
We drink, we fight, we laugh, we keep.
With hammer, pick, and steel so bright,
*We carve the mountain day and night."**

"So raise your mugs and drown your fears,
*Let dwarven songs ring through the years!"**

His voice echoed through the empty tavern, filling the forgotten space with life once more, if only for a moment.

As the last note faded, he sighed, staring at the flames of his torch, lost in thought.

Ogar sat slumped in the old tavern, the warmth of the strange liquor still coursing through his veins, leaving his limbs pleasantly loose and heavy. Whatever had been in that old keg, it was stronger than most drinks he'd had in his life.

He let out a deep sigh, blinking at the map laid out before him, the torchlight making the charcoal lines flicker like living things.

"One more room," he muttered to himself, stretching his broad shoulders before grabbing his gear. "Just a bit further."

He rose to his feet, snuffing out his pipe, and secured his sword belt. With the torch in one hand and the map in the other, he ventured deeper into the tunnels, the ancient stones whispering under his heavy boots.

The passage led him further than expected, the tunnel's walls changing as he walked. The rough, mined-out rock slowly gave way to something else—stonework.

Ogar stopped in his tracks, lifting his torch higher.

The walls were carved, smooth, and engraved with intricate dwarven runes, the kind only masters of the craft could shape. He ran his gloved fingers along the engravings, feeling the fine craftsmanship beneath the thick layer of dust. His pulse quickened.

This wasn't just a mine anymore. This was something more.

As he stepped through a wide stone archway, the space before him opened up into a grand chamber of high ceilings, and Ogar's breath caught in his throat.

The room was magnificent, even in ruin.

Thick stone pillars, beautifully chiseled, stretched upward to support the vaulted ceiling. The walls were lined with heavy wooden shelves, their contents still standing after centuries of abandonment—metal goblets, small statues, old books with cracked leather spines, and carved stone trinkets.

A long, thick rug, once richly woven, now tattered and faded, stretched across the floor, leading deeper inside.

The air smelled of old wood, dust, and distant memories.

Along the walls, mounted animal heads stared at him, their glass eyes long clouded over with age—a great mountain ram, a massive black bear, even the skull of some unknown beast with long curling horns.

The furniture was heavy oak, every surface adorned with intricate carvings of dwarven battle scenes, runes of old kings, and mountain landscapes.

A large stone table, covered in dust, still held the remnants of a feast long forgotten—silver plates with rotted scraps of food, goblets tipped over, and a rusted dagger stabbed into the wood as if left in anger or haste. This wasn't just any chamber. This was a king's chambers. And whoever had lived here had left in a hurry.

Ogar walked carefully, his boots sinking into the thick dust, stirring up the scent of ancient things long undisturbed.

He moved toward a heavy wooden cupboard, pulling the doors open to reveal rows of ceramic and metal dishes, still lined up as if waiting for a feast that never came.

On a smaller table, he saw a set of fine brushes, their bristles stiff with age, alongside small vials of dried-up oils and balms—perhaps once used for beard grooming or perfuming the noble class.

A large fireplace, still filled with charcoal long turned to ash, sat against the far wall, above it a massive stone crest depicting two crossed axes beneath a crowned mountain—a royal emblem of some forgotten lineage.

"Who lived here?" Ogar muttered to himself, his voice swallowed by the vast silence.

He moved further, stepping into what must have been a bedchamber.

The bedroom was just as grand as the hall.

A massive oak bed, draped in what had once been fine furs and silks, sat against the back wall, its once lavish pillows now deflated and crumbling with age.

A large stone chest rested at the foot of the bed, its iron hinges rusted shut, but beside it stood a wardrobe, its drawers slightly ajar, as if someone had searched through them long ago.

Ogar opened them, the wood creaking from centuries of neglect.

Inside, he found a thick traveling cloak, now stiff with dust, and beneath it, smaller items—things of value.

His fingers brushed against something smooth and cold.

Lifting it into the torchlight, he saw a golden necklace, finely crafted, its chain still unbroken.

Beside it, nestled among the folds of an old silk robe, was a gold ring, engraved with runes too worn to read.

He held them up, examining them with a grin.

"These weren't just any dwarf's possessions," he muttered, tucking them into his belt pouch. "A noble… or maybe a queen's." The thought amused him. Ogar the King.

He let out a deep chuckle, rubbing his fingers through his beard, then cast a glance at the massive bed behind him.

He wasn't normally one to rest in strange places, but something about this room felt oddly comfortable.

The drink still swam in his blood, making his limbs loose and warm, and after all, he had earned a moment of rest.

Grinning to himself, he strode over, dusted off a fur blanket, and laid down.

The mattress was surprisingly intact, the furs still thick and plush beneath him.

He stretched his arms behind his head, staring at the stone ceiling, listening to the faint sounds of water dripping somewhere far off.

For a moment, he let himself imagine—what it would have been like to live here as a king, drinking fine wines, wearing golden rings, having servants bring him roasted boar and fresh bread while songs were sung of his greatness.

He let out a soft laugh, shaking his head.

"Bah… wouldn't suit me," he muttered. "Too much sittin' around. I'd go mad in a week."

Still, the warmth of the bed, the comfort of the ancient chamber, and the soft haze of drink in his mind made him feel at ease for the first time in days.

Maybe he would just close his eyes for a bit…

Just for a moment.

Ogar stirred, his eyes slowly opening to the dim torchlight flickering against the carved stone walls of the king's chamber. For a brief moment, he forgot where he was. The thick furs beneath him felt almost too comfortable, too warm, too much like something from a dream.

Then, reality settled back into his bones.

He rubbed his face, blinking away the haze of sleep and drink, and pushed himself up from the massive oak bed.

"How long did I sleep?" he muttered to himself, stretching his arms over his head. It must have been a few hours, no more. The tunnels were still silent, but they had always been silent.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed, reached for his helmet, and buckled his sword belt. He had rested enough—it was time to move on.

Rolling up the king's map, he tucked it away and left the grand chambers, stepping back into the ancient tunnels.

Ogar's boots echoed softly against the stone as he walked, his torch casting long shadows against the walls. He wasn't sure where he was heading now—only that his curiosity wasn't sated yet.

He moved deeper, past the archways of old noble halls, through corridors lined with carved runes and forgotten histories.

Then, he saw something strange.

At first, he thought it was just part of the tunnel wall, a strange growth of fungi, sprouting up along the cracks and crevices, glowing faintly in soft green and blue hues.

But then it moved.

Ogar froze, his hand hovering over his sword hilt.

The growth detached itself slightly, revealing a vaguely humanoid form, its body a fusion of mossy bark and twisting fungal tendrils. Its head was bulbous, crowned with mushroom-like protrusions, and it had two eyes, small but intelligent, watching him silently from the wall.

It did not attack.

It simply stared.

Ogar narrowed his eyes, unsure if it was some trick of the dark or if he had drunk too much from the old tavern kegs.

"... What in the pit are you?" he finally asked.

The fungus creature did not move, did not blink.

Then, suddenly, a voice bloomed inside Ogar's skull—soft, deep, and ancient, like stone cracking open after centuries of silence.

"I… am here."

Ogar stiffened, his grip tightening around the torch handle.

"That didn't come outta yer mouth," he muttered.

The creature's eyes remained fixed on him, unblinking.

"Words are small things. I do not use them. I share… in the way of my kind."

Ogar frowned, shifting on his feet, looking the creature up and down. "Aye? And what kind are ye?"

There was a long pause, then the voice returned—inside his mind, calm and unwavering.

"I am… before you. Before your kin. Before your halls and stones and mines. I am… always. My roots remember. My spores whisper. I… am Myconid."

Ogar exhaled sharply, shaking his head. "Aye, well, that makes no damned sense to me."

The fungus man remained still. The air felt thick, heavy, as if the very tunnels themselves were listening.

Then, the voice returned, this time slower, more distant, as if drifting through time itself.

"You do not understand. You do not need to. The stones have no ears, yet they feel the hammer. The water has no eyes, yet it shapes the world. The roots have no words, yet they speak."

Ogar ran a hand down his beard, sighing. "Yer a cryptic little bastard, ain't ye?"

For the first time, the Myconid's eyes shifted, tilting its strange head slightly, as if studying him further.

"I am what I have always been. What I will always be. I watched the first steps in these tunnels. I watched the last."

Ogar squinted. "Ye sayin' ye were here before the dwarves? Before this place was built?"

"Before stone met steel. Before halls were carved. Before your kin mined the first vein of ore. I was here."

A chill ran up Ogar's spine, and not from the cold.

This creature—this Myconid—was older than the dwarves. Older than the ruins themselves.

And it wasn't hostile.

Just… watching. Remembering. Existing.

He shifted his torchlight, studying the way its body intertwined with the stone, how it seemed to meld with the tunnel itself, neither fully separate nor fully part of it.

It was like the walls had grown a mind, a voice, and a memory of their own.

Ogar took a deep breath, still unsure whether this was madness, drink, or something else entirely.

The fungus man twitched, then in a sudden burst of motion, it scrambled up the tunnel wall, its limbs twisting unnaturally, its body melding into the stone and darkness as it skittered across the ceiling.

Ogar staggered back, startled at the creature's inhuman movement, watching as it vanished into the deep tunnels, its faint bioluminescent spores drifting in the air.

For a long moment, he simply stood there, breathing heavily.

"Well," he muttered to himself, "that was damned strange."

At least the thing wasn't hostile. That was more than he could say for most creatures in these tunnels.

He adjusted his helmet, gripping his torch tighter, and turned away, continuing deeper into the forgotten corridors of stone.

The next chamber was different.

The air was staler here, heavy with an ancient stillness that clung to the stone like a forgotten memory. His torchlight illuminated the chamber's vaulted ceiling, lined with dwarven carvings, their edges smoothed by time.

And in the center of the room, resting atop a raised stone dais, lay a massive sarcophagus.

Ogar stepped forward, boots echoing in the silence, his eyes tracing the inscriptions carved along the lid. The dwarven runes were faded, worn, but he could still make out parts of it:

"Here rests Olthar…"

The rest was too eroded to read.

"A noble, maybe," he muttered, tilting his head as he ran a gloved hand over the cold stone.

"Or a warlord. Or some poor bastard who just had enough gold fer a fancy burial."

With a grunt, he patted the sarcophagus, feeling the weight of centuries beneath his touch.

And that was when the mist began to rise.

A low, eerie whisper filled the chamber, curling around him like a cold breath against the skin.

Ogar froze, his muscles tensing as he watched wisps of white-gray mist seep from the edges of the sarcophagus, swirling like living tendrils into the air.

The mist thickened, rising higher, twisting into the shape of a figure, its form long and gaunt, its face hollow, its eyes nothing but black voids.

A wraith.

Ogar cursed, stepping back as the spectral being hovered above the sarcophagus, its form flickering like smoke caught in a storm.

Its voice slithered through the air, a sound that was neither whisper nor word—but something ancient, something that vibrated deep in his bones.

"Why… do you… disturb… my rest?"

Ogar scowled, tightening his grip on his sword hilt. "Wasn't plannin' to. But ye showed up lookin' all ghostly and unfriendly, and now we got a problem."

The wraith's form twisted, its face contorting into something inhuman, as if it struggled to recall what it once was.

"You walk where the dead do not welcome you… and now… you shall join them."

The chamber grew colder, the very air sapping the warmth from Ogar's skin. His breath misted before him, and he felt the unnatural chill creeping into his limbs.

Then the wraith lunged.

Ogar barely had time to draw his sword before the wraith's clawed hand slashed toward his chest, an unnatural force striking against him like a hammer of ice.

Pain shot through his ribcage, not from a physical wound, but from something deeper, something clawing at his very essence.

"Gah!" he grunted, stumbling back, gripping his sword tighter as he swung at the creature.

His blade cut through the misty form, but the wraith simply shrieked, its ethereal body twisting away, reforming instantly.

It lunged again, this time aiming for his throat.

Ogar ducked, rolling to the side as the wraith's claws scraped against the stone, leaving behind a trail of frost.

"*Ye wanna dance, ghost?! Fine!*"

He gritted his teeth, shaking off the cold spreading through his limbs, and charged forward, swinging his sword in a wide arc.

This time, as his blade met the wraith's body, a crackling burst of light erupted from the impact—his steel reacting against the unnatural being.

The wraith let out a horrible wail, recoiling, its form flickering violently.

"*Steel still bites ye, huh?*" Ogar growled, pressing his attack.

With a roar, he swung again, driving his blade into the creature's core, feeling resistance where there should have been none.

The wraith shuddered, twisting and writhing, its howls echoing off the walls, shaking the very chamber.

Then—with one final strike, Ogar drove his sword straight through the wraith's center, splitting it apart like mist before the wind.

A final, hollow shriek filled the chamber—then silence.

The mist dissipated, the unnatural cold vanishing, leaving behind nothing but dust and silence once more.

Ogar panted, rolling his shoulders, the last remnants of the wraith's chill fading from his body.

"Well, that was rude."

His gaze dropped back to the sarcophagus, his lip curling in irritation.

"If ye wanted yer rest, ye shoulda stayed quiet, ghost," he muttered.

Then, he smiled.

"Ye know what? That was so damned rude that I think I'm entitled to a bit o' compensation."

Still gripping his sword, Ogar stepped forward, placed his gloved hands against the heavy stone lid, and with a grunt of effort, pushed it aside.

The sarcophagus groaned open, revealing the remains of Olthar—a skeleton, clad in the tattered remnants of noble garments, their fabrics worn to near nothingness.

And there, nestled beside the bones, was a leather bag.

Ogar reached inside and pulled it free, feeling the weight of metal within.

Untying the cord, he peered inside—silver nuggets, some polished, some raw, gleaming even in the dim torchlight.

And at the bottom, five old gold coins, their faces worn with time, but still undeniably valuable.

Ogar grinned.

"Guess ye won't be needin' these anymore," he muttered, tucking the bag into his belt pouch.

With one final pat on the sarcophagus, he straightened, rolled his shoulders, and stepped back from the tomb of Olthar.

"Rest in peace, aye? Or don’t. Ain’t my problem."

With that, he grabbed his torch, took one last glance at the darkened chamber, and strode back into the tunnels once more.

Ogar strode out of the burial chamber, his boots kicking up dust, the weight of the coin pouch heavy at his belt. He had seen strange things today, but that wraith? That had been too much.

"Never shoulda patted that damned sarcophagus," he muttered to himself, shaking his head as he adjusted his torchlight, preparing to head back to more familiar tunnels.

The thought of a warm meal, a stiff drink, and his own bed sounded like a fine idea.

But then—

Tink. Tink. Tink.

Ogar stopped.

The faint sound of a pickaxe striking stone echoed from a side tunnel off to his right.

His stomach tightened.

There was no one down here but him.

Slowly, he turned toward the sound, his fingers drifting toward the hilt of his sword.

Tink. Tink. Tink.

Rhythmic. Steady. A miner at work.

Ogar’s brows furrowed. The abandoned tunnels had been sealed for centuries. There was no way someone was down here, working the stone.

Unless…

Unless something had been left behind.

Gripping his torch tighter, he cautiously stepped toward the darkened tunnel, his boots grinding softly against the rock.

The picking sounds continued, steady and deliberate, as if someone was digging for ore, completely unaware of his approach.

Then, as he turned the corner, he froze.

The tunnel was narrow, lined with support beams, and at the far end stood a figure, half-hidden in the shadows of the rock.

A man.

Or at least, something that looked like one.

His back was hunched, his clothes ragged and torn, his skin covered in dust and grime as if he had been digging here for centuries.

His arms moved in a slow, mechanical rhythm, swinging a rusted pickaxe against the stone wall, the sound dull and distant.

Ogar inhaled sharply, taking a careful step closer.

"Oi," he called out, his voice low and firm. "Who in the hells are ye? What're ye doin' down here?"

The man did not stop.

Did not look up.

Just kept digging.

Ogar's pulse pounded in his ears.

He stepped closer, and now he could see more clearly—

The man's hands were thin, almost skeletal, his fingernails blackened, his arms unnaturally gaunt. His face, when it turned slightly toward Ogar, was hollow, his eyes sunken and lifeless, his cheeks stretched over a frame that should not still be standing.

And yet, the pickaxe rose and fell.

Over and over.

Digging.

Endlessly.

Ogar felt a cold sweat form at the back of his neck.

"By the gods…"

The figure suddenly stopped.

For the first time, the hollow-eyed miner turned toward him, his cracked lips parting slightly, a sound escaping his throat—

A whisper.

In a tongue Ogar did not know.

A language older than the tunnels, older than the stone itself.

Ogar stiffened, his body screaming at him to run, to leave, to turn back.

Then—

The man crumbled.

Right before his eyes, the figure collapsed into dust, his body disintegrating into the air, the pickaxe clattering to the ground with a hollow clang.

Ogar stood frozen, his breath coming in short, ragged gasps.

The dust settled.

The tunnel was silent once more.

Ogar stared at the empty space, his heart hammering like a war drum.

Then he turned and ran.

His boots pounded against the stone floor, his torch flickering wildly as he rushed back toward the entrance, his mind racing.

That had not been a living dwarf.

That had not been a normal ghost.

That had been something else.

Something trapped down here for centuries, digging, working, repeating the same motion over and over again.

For how long?

And for what purpose?

By the time he reached the sealed tunnel entrance, his breath was ragged, his chest heaving with exertion and panic.

He squeezed himself back through the gap in the wooden boards, emerging into the familiar tunnels of the working mines, the sound of living dwarves hammering, digging, talking filling his ears.

It took him a moment to realize he was gripping his sword hilt so tightly his knuckles had gone white.

He exhaled, forcing himself to breathe slower.

"It’s done," he muttered. "I’m done."

Ogar returned to his work spot, dropping his torch into a bucket of sand, yanking off his helmet, armor, gloves, and boots, stuffing them into his stash of hidden gear.

He couldn’t think straight.

The wraith had been bad enough.

But this?

This was something else entirely.

Without another word, he left the mines, ignoring the passing nods of other dwarves, moving straight for his home.

Back in his stone-walled home, Ogar sat by his fireplace, the flames crackling softly, a mug of strong liquor in his hands.

He had no appetite.

The whispered words of the ghostly miner still echoed in his skull, even though he hadn’t understood a damn word.

He drained the mug in one gulp, then tossed it onto the table.

With a deep sigh, he rubbed his face, then ran his hands through his beard, braiding it tightly, as if grounding himself in something familiar.

Then, finally, he stood, stripped down to his bedclothes, and collapsed onto his bed, staring at the ceiling.

"Not goin’ back there," he muttered to himself, his voice low, uncertain. "Not alone."

The room was warm, the fire crackling softly.

But the tunnels below?

They were still waiting for him.

And something deep down told him…

He wouldn’t be able to stay away for long.

The morning came sooner than Ogar would have liked.

He had woken groggy, the memory of the whispering ghostly miner still fresh in his mind, but today he was determined to keep things normal. No ancient tunnels, no spirits, no cursed places.

Just work.

And first, he needed a new pickaxe.

The carpenter’s workshop was filled with the scent of freshly cut wood and sawdust, beams stacked high against the walls, and finished tools neatly arranged on thick wooden racks.

Behind the workbench stood Leda, a broad-shouldered dwarven woman with auburn braids, strong hands, and a smile that rarely left her face.

She was sharpening a chisel when Ogar walked in.

"Well, well," Leda said, leaning against her worktable, grinning as she wiped sawdust off her apron. "If it ain’t the grumpiest miner in the hold. What do ye need today, Ogar?"

"A new pickaxe," Ogar grumbled, setting down his old, splintered one on the counter. "This one’s done for."

Leda picked up the broken tool, running a calloused thumb along the cracked handle.

"Aye, looks like ye went and used it as a club again. Goblins or rocks?"

Ogar snorted. "Bit o’ both."

She chuckled. "Lucky fer you, I got some fine iron heads ready. Just need to fit a handle, and it’ll be as good as new."

Ogar nodded, reaching for his coin pouch. "How long?"

Leda grinned, crossing her arms. "Could have it done by tomorrow… or maybe sooner, if ye help me with the handle."

Ogar raised a brow. "I ain’t no carpenter, Leda."

"Aye," she said, smiling. "But ye got hands, don’t ye? Shouldn’t be too hard fer a strong miner like yerself to shave down a piece o’ wood."

Ogar grumbled but knew she was baiting him. He didn’t mind a bit of woodwork—but he also knew she was testing him.

He grabbed a small plane tool from her workbench and set to smoothing down the length of wood, trying to shave it into the proper shape for the pickaxe handle.

But it didn’t take long before he pressed too hard, and—crack!

A chunk of wood split off the side, ruining the symmetry of the handle.

Ogar cursed, tossing the ruined piece aside. "Bah! See? Told ye I ain’t no damned carpenter."

Leda laughed, shaking her head. "Ye press too hard, Ogar. Handle work ain’t like swingin’ a pickaxe—ye gotta be gentle."

Ogar’s face darkened, crossing his arms. "Bah. Then ye do it. It’s yer job. I ain’t got time fer this."

Leda raised an eyebrow, her smile deepening. "Oh? Ye give up so easy, then? Thought ye were a stubborn one."

"Stubborn, aye," Ogar grumbled. "But not a damned woodworker."

She mockingly sighed, dramatically placing a hand on her hip. "Fine, fine. If it’s too much fer ye, I’ll finish it meself. Wouldn’t want those precious mining hands o’ yers gettin’ soft."

Ogar scowled, but there was no malice behind it. "Just get me my pickaxe, Leda. I’ll pay extra if it means ye keep yer smart mouth shut."

Leda grinned wider. "Oh, I like ye when ye’re all flustered."

Ogar groaned, turning toward the door. "I need a drink."

Leda called after him. "Aye, go cry into yer ale, miner!"

Ogar didn’t bother to look back, but he could hear her laughing as he stomped out.

By the time Ogar reached the tavern, the heat of his frustration had cooled, and soon enough, mugs of ale were flowing freely.

The Golden Beard was loud and lively, the scent of roasted meat and spilled liquor thick in the air. Ogar found himself sitting alone for a bit, drinking away the irritation, when a familiar voice piped up behind him.

"Ye still sulkin’, or ye feel like apologizin’?"

Ogar looked up to see Leda standing there, arms crossed, her own mug in hand.

He sighed. "Aye, aye. I was an arse back there. Ye happy?"

Leda grinned, plopping herself down next to him. "Not yet. Maybe after a few more drinks."

Ogar snorted. "Aye, I can drink to that."

They clinked mugs, and soon enough, Ogar found himself talking with her more than drinking, sharing stories of old workdays, wild mining accidents, fights he’d had with goblins, and the general nonsense of dwarven life.

Leda, for her part, had a quick wit and a sharp tongue, and every time Ogar tried to tease her, she threw it back at him twice as hard.

Then, the music started.

A fast, stomping dwarven rhythm, the kind meant for clapping, spinning, and proper dancing.

Leda grinned, finishing her ale in one long gulp before grabbing Ogar's wrist.

"Come on, miner. Let's see if ye can dance better than ye can carve wood."

Ogar grunted, shaking his head. "I ain't much fer dancin'."

"Bah, if ye can swing a pick, ye can move yer feet. Come on!"

Before he could protest further, she dragged him onto the tavern floor, where dwarves were already stomping in time with the beat.

At first, Ogar moved stiffly, but after a few more drinks and Leda's constant laughter, he loosened up, spinning her in time with the rest of the dancers, stomping in rhythm, the heat of ale and the sound of cheers filling his veins.

It was a good night.

A damned good night.

By the time the dancing slowed, and the music faded, Ogar and Leda found themselves sitting close, still laughing, still drinking, still feeling the warmth of too much ale and good company.

Leda leaned in slightly, her breath smelling of honeyed mead and firewood, her eyes sharp with mischief.

"Ye know," she said, tracing a finger along the rim of her empty mug, "Fer a grumpy bastard, ye ain't too bad."

Ogar smiled. "And fer a bossy carpenter, ye ain't half bad yerself."

She raised an eyebrow. "Only half?"

Ogar chuckled, shaking his head. "Maybe… a bit more than half."

Leda grinned. "Good answer."

And then, without another word, she grabbed his braids, pulled him in, and kissed him.

Ogar, caught off guard for only a moment, let himself lean into it, the taste of ale, laughter, and warmth mixing between them.

The night ended back at his home, the fire crackling low, the world fading into a comfortable haze as they tangled together under the dim glow of the hearth.

For once, Ogar wasn't thinking about cursed tunnels, ghosts, or ancient horrors.

Tonight, he was just a miner, a man, and nothing else mattered.

Day at work

Ogar awoke to the soft morning glow filtering through the stone crevices of his home, the warmth of last night's fire still lingering in the air.

Beside him, Leda stirred, stretching and running a hand through her auburn braids, a lazy smile on her lips.

"Ye snore," she muttered, smiling.

Ogar grunted, rubbing his eyes with a broad hand. "Aye, and ye kick in yer sleep. Nearly sent me off the bed."

Leda chuckled, sitting up and reaching for her shirt. "That’s cause ye take up too much space."

They ate a quick breakfast—thick bread, salted meat, and some leftover cheese—before Leda finally rose, rolling her shoulders.

"Back to work, then," she said, buttoning her tunic.

Ogar watched her for a moment before grinning. "Ye leavin’ already? Thought ye’d wanna stick around and make sure I don’t mess up another handle."

Leda snorted, shaking her head. "Hah! Nah, ye’ll manage. I’ll be seein’ ye soon enough, miner."

With that, she grabbed her leather tool belt and headed for the door, her boots echoing against the stone floor.

Ogar sat for a moment longer, finishing his last bite of breakfast, before sighing.

Time for work.

When Ogar arrived at the mining workstations, the overseer—a grizzled dwarf named Barik—shoved a pile of battered tools in his direction.

"Yer task today," Barik grumbled. "Repair five pickaxes. Ain’t got time to be orderin’ new ones."

Ogar groaned, looking at the damned pile of broken tools like they had personally insulted him.

"Five? I ain't a bloody blacksmith."

Barik grunted. "Then ye’d best get learnin’. I want ‘em fixed by midday."

Muttering a few choice curses, Ogar picked up the pile and headed to Leda’s workshop.

When Ogar arrived, Leda was already hammering a thick wooden beam into place, sweat on her brow, muscles taut with effort.

She glanced at him, then at the stack of broken pickaxes, and immediately grinned.

"Ah, look at this!" she said, stepping back and wiping her hands on her apron. "Ogar the Woodworker returns! Come fer another lesson?"

Ogar dropped the pile onto her workbench with a heavy thunk. "I got stuck with repair duty. Just gimme the wood I need, and I'll be outta yer way."

Leda crossed her arms, tapping a finger against her chin in mock thought. "Hmm. But see, ye botched the last handle ye made. Maybe ye should practice."

Ogar rolled his eyes. "Leda, if ye don't hand me the wood, I'm takin' it meself."

She laughed, tossing him a stack of handle-sized logs. "Fine, fine. But this time, try not to make 'em look like tree roots."

With a grumble, Ogar got to work, carving the new handles, smoothing the edges, and attaching the iron pick heads.

It was tedious work, but after the second handle, he started getting the hang of it.

By the time he was finished with the fifth, Leda leaned over, inspecting his work with mock scrutiny.

"Not bad," she admitted. "A bit rough, but they won't break on the first swing."

Ogar wiped wood shavings off his tunic. "Good. Cause if I had to redo 'em, I'd be usin' one o' these on meself."

Leda chuckled. "Ye still got all yer fingers, so I'd call it a success."

With the pickaxes repaired, Ogar handed them back to Barik, who grunted in approval and immediately handed him another task.

"Now go fetch that damned ale keg that rolled down Shaft Seven. It's been sittin' down there since last night."

Ogar groaned. "By meself?"

"Aye," Barik said, already walking away.

Ogar sighed, shaking his head.

"Of course," he muttered. "Of bloody course."

Shaft Seven was a narrow, steep mine shaft, one that dropped into the deeper sections of the working tunnels.

At the edge of the opening, Ogar secured a thick rope to a wooden post, testing its strength before fastening it to his belt.

Peering over the edge, he spotted the ale keg below, lodged against a pile of loose stone.

"Why's it always ale gettin' lost?" he muttered. "Never the damned empty ones."

Gripping the rope tightly, he lowered himself down, his boots bracing against the rocky walls, moving slow and steady.

As he descended, he muttered to himself, cursing the stubbornness of dwarven drink and the stupidity of rolling kegs.

By the time he reached the bottom, his arms were already aching, but he ignored it.

The keg was wedged tightly, and after a few shoves and curses, he managed to pry it loose.

Now came the real challenge—getting it back up.

Securing another rope around the keg, he climbed back up first, pulling himself onto the ledge, panting from the effort.

Then, he began hauling the keg up, inch by inch, the wood creaking against the stone as he pulled.

It was slow. It was damned hard.

And it was miserable.

"Come on, ye heavy bastard!" he growled, his muscles burning as he pulled.

After what felt like an eternity, the keg finally reached the top, rolling onto the ledge with a thud.

Ogar collapsed onto his back, breathing heavily, staring at the ceiling of the mine.

"I swear," he muttered to himself, "if one more bloody thing rolls down a shaft, I'm leavin' it there."

With a final grunt, he got up, dusted himself off, and dragged the keg back toward the workstations, muttering curses the entire way.

After a long day of fixing pickaxes, hauling stubborn ale kegs, and cursing the gods of mining, Ogar was ready for a drink.

The familiar warmth and chaos of the Golden Beard Tavern welcomed him as he stepped inside, shaking off the dust and soreness of the day. The air was thick with the scent of roasted meat, spilled ale, and smoke from dwarven pipes.

At the corner table, two familiar bearded faces were already waiting—Tormli and Brokk, their mugs already half-empty, their voices loud and merry as they traded jokes with a few other miners.

Ogar grinned. Just what he needed.

"Oi, there he is!" Brokk bellowed, raising his mug in greeting. "Ye look like ye crawled outta the pit, Ogar!"

Ogar dropped onto the bench, grabbing a mug of ale from a passing barmaid. "Felt like it, too. Spent me day fightin' pickaxes and draggin' a damn keg up a shaft."

Tormli snorted, setting down his drink. "That's why I stay away from real work. Ye should take up cards, Ogar—hands get softer, coin still flows."

Ogar chuckled, taking a deep drink of ale before leaning in slightly, lowering his voice. "I got somethin' better than cards to talk about."

Tormli and Brokk exchanged glances, interest piqued.

Ogar wiped the foam from his beard. "I went back into that sealed-off mine—the old tunnels."

Brokk's eyebrows shot up. "Ye what?"

Tormli whistled low. "I thought ye were done with that madness."

Ogar shook his head, grinning slightly. "Turns out, there's more down there than just dust and bad air. I found livin' quarters, armory, a king's chambers—hells, even a tomb. Place was a proper hold, once."

Brokk leaned in, his eyes gleaming with interest. "A whole livin' area? With loot?"

"Aye," Ogar nodded. "Enough gear to prove dwarves used to live and work down there. But it's more than just some forgotten mine. There's tunnels I haven't explored yet. And I ain't been able to shake the feeling that somethin' else is down there."

Tormli rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Hells, that's a tale worth hearin'."

Brokk grinned, cracking his knuckles. "And worth seein', I'd say. Ye goin' back?"

Ogar took another long drink, then set the mug down. "I was thinkin' about it. But alone? Not this time. If I go back, I want a few blades at me side."

The two dwarves exchanged knowing grins.

Tormli smiled. "Good thing we know how to use 'em."

As the night stretched on, the three laid out a rough plan.

They talked about what weapons they'd bring, how they'd gear up properly before venturing into the old tunnels together.

Brokk and Tormli had both spent years training with weapons at Battlemaster Durn's place, honing their skills with swords, axes, and even a bit of shield work.

"Not sayin' we're warriors, but we ain't slouches with steel," Brokk said, lifting his mug with a cocky grin.

Ogar nodded. "That's good, 'cause we ain't goin' down there for a walk. I already had to put down a goblin or two. And I ain't gonna be surprised if there's worse."

Tormli leaned forward, his voice lower now. "Ye think there's gold in those tunnels?"

Ogar smiled, tapping his belt pouch where his newly found old coins and silver nuggets sat. "I think there's plenty."

That was all Brokk and Tormli needed to hear.

"We'll get our gear together," Brokk said. "When do we go?"

"Couple days," Ogar replied. "Enough time to get ready, get weapons, and not walk down there blind."

Tormli raised his mug. "To lootin' the past!"

They all clinked their drinks together, their fate sealed.

The night carried on, the tavern growing louder as the ale flowed. At some point, a burly dwarf from the forges—Grimbar Ironjaw—stepped up to their table, slamming a thick fist down.

"Ogar! I hear ye got an iron grip. Let's see if ye can take on the strongest arm in the Beard!"

Ogar wiped his mouth and grinned.

The other dwarves started cheering, placing bets, coins clinking onto the table.

"Fifteen silver says Ogar wins!" Brokk bellowed, tossing a handful of coin down.

"Bah! Ironjaw'll crush him!" another dwarf yelled.

The tavern roared as the match began.

Ogar and Grimbar locked hands, muscles tensed, and knuckles turned white.

At first, Grimbar held strong, his arm like a pillar of stone, unmoving.

But Ogar dug in, gritting his teeth, his forearm bulging as he forced Grimbar's hand downward inch by inch.

The forge-dwarf’s face turned red, his teeth bared in strain.

"Come on, Ironjaw!" someone shouted. "Ye can’t lose to a bloody miner!"

But Ogar just grinned wider, planting his feet and letting out a growl as he slammed Grimbar’s fist against the table.

BANG!

The tavern exploded in cheers and groans.

Brokk whooped, snatching up his winnings as Tormli clapped Ogar on the back.

"Ye’re a bloody ox!" Brokk laughed.

Ogar chuckled, rolling his shoulders. "Maybe. Or maybe Grimbar needs to quit hammerin’ metal and start liftin’ somethin’ heavier."

The forge-dwarf grumbled, rubbing his aching arm, but in good dwarven fashion, he shoved a mug of ale toward Ogar.

"Well fought," Grimbar admitted. "Ain’t losin’ next time, though."

Ogar just raised the mug in salute before downing it in one go.

The bartender, impressed with the show of strength, handed Ogar a free bottle of Darkbane, the strongest brew in the tavern.

Music filled the air, boots stomped to dwarven rhythm, and Ogar found himself caught in the drinking songs, the laughter, and the warmth of the night.

For now, there were no ghosts, no whispers, no thoughts of cursed tunnels.

Just ale, friends, and a long night of revelry.

But soon, the sealed mine tunnels would call again.

And this time, he wouldn’t be alone.

Ogar woke with a groan, rubbing his face as he sat up in bed. His head wasn’t aching too bad—Darkbane hit hard, but he’d had worse mornings. Besides, there was work to be done before he could go crawling through the old tunnels with Tormli and Brokk.

It was another day of labor, drinking, and waiting. And the mine never stopped needing hands.

His first job for the day came straight from Overseer Barik—delivering a batch of new oil lanterns to the lower tunnels, where the night shift miners would be starting soon.

"Ain’t no torches in some o’ them tunnels," Barik grunted. "And with some bastard thief sneakin’ supplies, I need eyes on every last lantern makin’ it to the right hands."

Ogar rolled his shoulders. "Aye, aye. Ye want me to carry ‘em, count ‘em, and make sure none walk off?"

Barik nodded. "Exactly. If I hear one’s missin’, I’ll have yer hide."

With a grumble, Ogar hauled the wooden crates filled with iron lanterns and glass oil flasks from the supply storage, loading them onto a handcart.

It was slow work, moving the cart down uneven mine shafts, feeling the oil slosh in the flasks as he went deeper into the tunnels.

The lower mines were always damp and cold, their walls slick with dripping condensation, the air thick with the smell of earth and metal.

One by one, he handed out the lanterns to the miners preparing for night shift, checking their names off the overseer’s list.

"Here’s yer light, don’t drop it," he muttered as he passed them out, ensuring each flask of oil was accounted for.

By the time he reached the last miner on his list, the crates were empty—just as they should be.

No missing lanterns. No sign of the thief.

But as he turned to leave, something caught his eye—a faint movement in the shadows, further down one of the side tunnels, where no miners should be at this hour.

Ogar squinted, gripping his belt.

"Oi," he called out. "Who’s there?"

Silence.

Then—a shuffle of footsteps.

Ogar took a step forward, but before he could get close, the figure darted away, disappearing down the tunnel.

He let out a low growl, debating whether to chase—but with the deliveries done and his next task waiting, he figured he’d mention it to Barik later.

With the lanterns delivered and accounted for, Ogar moved on to his second job of the day—mushroom gathering.

The lower mines held damp cave pockets where edible deep mushrooms thrived—mushrooms that the miners’ stew depended on.

Without them, the evening feast would be missing its main ingredient.

And if Ogar knew one thing, it was that a hall full of hungry dwarves was worse than any goblin ambush.

Armed with a cloth sack and a sharp knife, Ogar made his way into the side caverns, where the air turned thick and damp, the walls coated in moisture, and the ground soft underfoot.

Clusters of mushrooms clung to the rocky walls and floor, their caps thick and bulbous, their colors ranging from dark brown to deep red.

He knelt, carefully slicing the good ones at the stem, letting them fall into his sack.

But he kept an eye out for the dangerous ones.

The ghostcap mushrooms—pale, glowing faintly blue in the dim light—were deadly.

One wrong mushroom in the stew pot, and half the mine could be retching their guts out by morning.

He worked quickly, gathering the good fungi, making sure to leave the toxic ones untouched.

At one point, his boot slipped on the damp rock, nearly sending him face-first into a pile of ghostcaps.

"Bloody hells," he muttered, catching himself against the wall.

With a few more careful cuts, his sack was full, and he figured that was enough.

He turned to head back to the kitchens, but just as he did—

A low sound echoed behind him.

Not footsteps.

Not a voice.

But something else.

Something that almost sounded like… breathing.

Ogar froze, his fingers tightening around the knife.

The damp cave suddenly felt colder.

He turned slowly, his torchlight flickering against the cave walls—

And for a brief moment, he swore he saw something watching him from the deeper tunnel.

A pair of pale, gleaming eyes.

Then, they vanished.

Ogar exhaled sharply, shaking his head.

"Ye’re just seein’ things," he muttered. "Just the damned dark playin’ tricks."

Still, as he made his way back up, sack of mushrooms over his shoulder, he kept his hand close to his sword.

By the time Ogar returned to the feast hall, the air was already thick with the scent of roasting meat, baked bread, and boiling stew pots.

The kitchen dwarves took his mushroom sack with a grunt of approval, tossing the fungi into the great bubbling cauldron.

The evening feast was saved.

Ogar grabbed a tankard of ale, finally sitting down at the long tables, listening to the chatter of miners, smiths, and craftsmen, his body sore but his belly growling for food.

The next few days would bring adventure into the old mines.

But tonight?

Tonight was for good stew, strong drink, and the company of dwarves.

The missing supplies had finally caught the attention of the mountain overseers, and when the time came to send out a group to catch the thief, it was Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk who were chosen for the task.

Ogar grinned when he heard the assignment. "For once, we ain’t haulin’ barrels or fixin’ pickaxes. This sounds like a real job."

Brokk smiled, adjusting his belt knife. "Aye, a proper hunt. Whoever’s takin’ supplies must be quick and clever—been dodgin’ the watch fer weeks now."

Tormli snorted, checking the edge of his short sword. "Bet it’s some scrawny goblin, sneakin’ in through cracks. Or maybe a rat with hands."

Ogar chuckled, strapping on his leather armor. "Either way, let’s set a trap. No more vanishin’ goods."

And so, the hunt began.

Armed with torches, weapons, and sharp eyes, the trio moved through the mining tunnels, setting ambushes at key locations where supplies had gone missing before.

They started by hiding near the kitchens, where sacks of grain had vanished.

Then, they waited by the blacksmith's storeroom, where tools had been disappearing one by one.

Finally, they took turns watching the tunnel leading to the supply chamber, where oil, rope, and other useful goods had been steadily pilfered.

But the thief was clever.

Hours passed, and though they caught glimpses of movement, the creature always stayed ahead of them, blending into the shadows, vanishing just before they could pounce.

Ogar was impressed despite himself.

"Whoever this is, they know the tunnels better than us."

Tormli scowled. "Then we need to think smarter. Force 'em into a corner."

So they laid out one last trap—

A real ambush, near the supply chamber itself. This time, Ogar had an idea. The plan was simple. Ogar climbed inside one of the large supply crates, leaving just a small crack open to see.

Tormli and Brokk hid in the shadows, waiting for the thief to take the bait. For a long time, nothing happened. Then—a soft scratching. Ogar's breath slowed, his heart steadying. Something was outside the crate, shifting through supplies. A quiet creak echoed as a lid was lifted. The thief was here.

In a blur, Tormli leapt from the shadows with a roar, sword drawn. "GOT YE!"

But the thief was too quick.

With an agile twist, the figure darted away, sprinting down the tunnel.

"AFTER HIM!" Brokk bellowed, launching into pursuit.

Ogar burst from the crate, grabbing his short sword, and took off at full speed.

The tunnels were a maze, the thief weaving through them with skill, ducking under low beams, climbing over crates, slipping through tight gaps where the dwarves had to barrel through with brute force.

At one point, the thief nearly escaped into a side passage, but Ogar kicked a crate over, forcing him to change direction.

Tormli and Brokk stayed on either side, cutting off routes, herding the thief toward one final passage—

A dead-end chamber, where they had stacked some broken wooden beams.

The thief realized too late. He skidded to a halt, turned to run—

And Brokk tackled him from the side, bringing him crashing to the ground.

The tunnel echoed with a sharp yelp, then silence.

Ogar and Tormli arrived moments later, catching their breath as Brokk pinned their target down.

And finally, they saw who it was. Not a goblin. Not a giant rat. Not some tunnel-dwelling creature. A halfling.

Small, thin, covered in dirt, his clothes ragged, his eyes wide with fear.

Ogar's brow furrowed. "By the gods… ye ain't even a dwarf."

The halfling sniffled, looking around wildly. "I— I didn't mean to— I just— I was hungry! I — I didn't wanna—!"

His voice trembled, and to Ogar's surprise, tears welled in his eyes.

Brokk still had him pinned, but his face softened slightly.

"Aye," Brokk muttered. "He's just a lad."

Tormli scowled, crossing his arms. "A lad that's been stealin' from us."

Ogar let out a breath, rubbing the back of his neck.

"We ain't the ones makin' the call," he muttered. "Guards'll handle him."

The halfling shook his head, pleading. "Please! I don't wanna go to the dungeons—!"

But it was too late. Tormli had already called over two mountain guards, their armor clanking as they arrived.

The halfling was dragged to the mountain hold's dungeon, thrown into a stone cell, where he sat hunched in the corner, sniffing softly.

Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk stood outside the cell, watching silently.

Ogar sighed, arms crossed. "Not the usual kind o' thief we deal with." Tormli scoffed. "A thief's a thief."

Brokk shrugged. "Aye. But this one ain't a killer. He's just small and desperate."

Ogar grunted, shaking his head. "We did what we had to. Maybe he gets out one day. Maybe he don't. Ain't our problem now."

With that, the three turned away, heading back toward the tavern, where drinks and a long night of rest awaited.

For now, their job was done.

Down to the old mine

The day had finally arrived.

The day Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk would venture into the sealed tunnels together—not just for curiosity, but for whatever treasure, secrets, or dangers awaited them in the forgotten dark.

The three dwarves geared up, checking their weapons, armor, and supplies before setting out.

Ogar wore his leather armor jacket, sturdy boots, and the engraved gloves he had taken from the armory. His short sword hung at his hip, and his helmet sat firmly on his head.

Tormli strapped two hatchets to his belt, carrying a round shield on his back. "Can’t trust tunnels that ain’t seen a miner’s pick in centuries," he muttered, gripping a torch in his free hand.

Brokk adjusted the iron bracers on his arms, flexing his fingers. His broad axe rested across his back, and he had a dagger at his hip for tight spaces. "If somethin’ down there moves, it best be ready to die again."

With that, they descended into the tunnels, their boots echoing off the stone as they made their way toward the entrance to the abandoned mine.

The sealed-off section of the mine was just as Ogar had left it—quiet, cold, and untouched by living hands for countless years.

They reached the hole in the wooden planks, the crude opening that led to the lost tunnels beyond.

One by one, they squeezed through. And then, just like that, they were inside. The air was still, thick with dust and the scent of age. Tormli let out a low whistle. "Hells. This place feels… wrong." Brokk grunted. "Aye. Like the stone itself is watchin’."

Ogar led them through, showing them the places he had discovered alone.

First, he took them to the old tavern, where the tables and chairs still stood, where the bar counter remained, and where the kegs had sat undisturbed for generations.

"Here’s where the old miners drank, ate, and told their tales," Ogar said, leaning against a rickety chair. "And here’s where I found somethin’ to drink."

Tormli lifted a brow. "Ye drank that ancient swill?"

Ogar grinned, walking over to the kegs, where he pried one open and lifted it to his lips, taking a deep swig of the dark liquor inside.

Brokk laughed, grabbing a cup and filling it. "If ye live after drinkin' that, I'll try some too."

Tormli sighed, but even he couldn't resist taking a small sip, grimacing at the burning strength of it.

After the drink, they moved on.

Next was the armory, where Ogar had found his helmet, gloves, and boots.

Then, the king's chambers, where he had discovered golden rings and a noble's necklace.

Finally, they stood before the tomb chamber, where Ogar had fought the wraith.

He described the battle—the cold, the unnatural whispers, the way his sword had barely bit into the creature until he struck it down.

Tormli rubbed his arms. "That ain't a normal kind of fight, Ogar. That's a curse."

Brokk folded his arms, his eyes narrowed. "And the ghost miner? The one still swingin' his pick? That's the part that bothers me."

"Aye," Ogar muttered. "Both of 'em weren't meant to be walkin' anymore. But they were."

The words hung in the cold air.

For a long moment, the three dwarves sat in silence inside the tavern, staring at the map, laying it across a dust-covered table.

The charcoal-drawn lines of the map detailed the tunnels ahead, some of which Ogar had already explored.

But there was more—deeper paths, unmarked sections, places where the drawing had faded with time.

Tormli tapped a finger near the tomb. "Ye saw the wraith here."

"Aye," Ogar said.

Brokk traced his finger further down the tunnel beyond it. "And ye saw the ghost miner here."

"Aye."

Tormli exhaled. "That's too much cursed ground for my liking."

Ogar smiled, taking another drink from his cup. "And yet here we are, still sittin’ in it."

They all chuckled, but it was nervous laughter.

Brokk grunted. "We need to pick our next move."

Ogar leaned over, tapping a section of the map just beyond the tomb room.

"Here," he said. "A deeper tunnel. Haven’t seen it yet. Could be where the old tunnels lead further."

Tormli and Brokk nodded.

The decision was made.

With the plan set, the three stood, gathering their weapons and supplies, and made their way past the tomb, deeper into the tunnel.

The further they walked, the colder the air became.

The tunnel was narrower here, the walls damp, and the floor uneven with ancient rubble.

Their boots crunched against loose stone, their torches flickered against the dark, and their shadows danced like ghosts against the carved rock.

Ogar’s thoughts drifted as they walked.

He had seen strange things down here already.

A wraith guarding its tomb.

A ghost miner still bound to his work.

A fungus man speaking in ancient riddles.

What else lay ahead of them?

He glanced at Tormli, whose hands were tight around the haft of his hatchets.

He glanced at Brokk, whose fingers twitched near his axe.

They all felt it.

Something waiting in the deep.

Ogar licked his lips, adjusting his helmet.

"Well, boys," he muttered. "Ain’t no turnin’ back now."

And with that, they ventured further into the unknown.

The three dwarves moved cautiously through the tunnel, their torchlight flickering against the aged stone walls. It wasn't long before they stumbled upon another set of rooms, each filled with forgotten remnants of daily life—old wooden chairs, stone-carved shelves, shattered pottery, rusted cooking tools.

Tormli ran his hand over a table, his fingers brushing away a thick layer of dust. "Aye… folk lived here once. Proper homes."

Brokk nodded, examining an old chest against the wall, its hinges rusted shut. "And not just workers—this was a settlement. But what happened to 'em?"

Ogar remained silent, his eyes landing on a set of stone stairs descending further underground. His gut tightened.

"Down we go," he muttered.

One by one, they descended, the air growing colder, the light dimmer, until they arrived at a thick wooden door, reinforced with iron bands.

It was locked.

Tormli scratched his beard, scowling. "Now, that's a curious thing. Who the hells locked this? And from which side?"

Ogar folded his arms. "Aye. If the goblins've been runnin' around in these tunnels, how are they movin' if this door's been sealed?"

Brokk stepped forward, gripping his axe. "Ain't no mystery that an axe can't solve."

With a grunt, he swung the heavy blade, the iron edge biting into the wood with a dull thud. THUNK.

Another swing. CRACK.

The door splintered, and with one final kick, it burst open, its hinges snapping as it collapsed inward.

For a moment, there was only silence.

Then—a sound in the dark.

A faint chittering. A whisper. A chuckle.

Ogar's grip tightened around his sword.

Brokk stepped over the ruined door, peering into the shadows ahead. "Anyone else feelin' watched?"

Tormli cursed under his breath. "Aye." And then— The goblin voices rose from the darkness, laughing, mocking in their guttural tongue.

Ogar’s stomach twisted. They weren’t alone.

The air grew thick with tension, the whispers growing louder, closer.

Then, from the deep shadows of the tunnel, small figures shifted—pairs of glowing yellow eyes flashing in the dark.

A harsh, sneering voice rasped from the shadows: "Stupid dwarves… comin’ to die!"

Ogar raised his torch, and suddenly, ten goblins surged forward, their blades flashing, their teeth bared in twisted grins.

"They’re comin’!" Brokk roared. The fight exploded.

The first goblin lunged at Ogar, swinging a crude, rusted sword.

Ogar parried, twisting his blade before driving his boot into the goblin’s chest, sending it staggering back.

Another rushed him, dagger slashing wildly.

Ogar ducked, then slammed his pommel into its face, shattering teeth, before driving his sword through its throat.

Tormli spun, his twin hatchets flashing, catching a goblin by the arm and severing it clean, its screech cut short as his second blade buried itself in its skull.

Brokk, ever the brutal fighter, caught a charging goblin with a shoulder slam, sending the smaller creature sprawling, then brought his axe down, splitting its ribcage in two.

But the goblins were vicious.

A pair of them jumped onto Brokk’s back, clawing and stabbing at his armor.

"GET ‘EM OFF ME!" he bellowed.

Tormli spun, grabbing one goblin by the leg and hurling it into the wall, where it collapsed in a heap.

Ogar slashed across the second goblin’s back, sending it screaming as it tumbled off Brokk, writhing on the ground before he finished it with a stomp.

Three goblins remained, their confidence wavering.

They hissed, circling cautiously, waiting for an opening.

Then one of them snarled, "Dwarves die slow!" and lunged at Tormli.

Tormli barely managed to raise his shield, the goblin's dagger scraping against the iron rim, before he caught the creature's wrist and twisted—a sickening snap echoed as the goblin screamed.

Brokk hacked the next goblin nearly in half, its torso folding like wet parchment. The final goblin turned to flee. Ogar didn't let it.

With a quick, fluid motion, he grabbed his dagger, hurled it forward, and watched as the blade buried itself deep in the goblin's back.

The creature collapsed, twitching once before going still. Silence fell. The goblins were dead. Ogar leaned against the tunnel wall, breathing hard. Tormli spat on the ground, wiping his hatchets on a dead goblin's tunic. "Ten o' the bastards. Must've been lurkin' for us."

Brokk rolled his shoulders, wincing at a gash across his arm. "Aye. But they're dead, and we ain't. That's what matters." Ogar looked deeper into the tunnel, where the goblins had come from. Something about this didn't sit right.

"They were too organized." He muttered, kneeling to inspect one of the goblin corpses. "Goblins fight dirty, aye—but they don't usually fight like this."

Tormli frowned. "What're ye thinkin'?" Ogar exhaled, standing. "I'm thinkin'... there might be more down here."

Brokk cursed. "If there's a whole nest o' the bastards, we might be dealin' with more than just old tunnels." Ogar nodded, wiping his blade clean.

"Let's move careful-like," he said, adjusting his helmet. Tormli and Brokk exchanged glances, then nodded.

The tunnel ahead stretched long and dark, the stench of dead goblins lingering in the cold air. Ogar led the way, his torch casting flickering shadows on the walls as they moved cautiously through the forgotten stone corridors. Brokk walked beside him, gripping his axe, and Tormli followed close behind, his hatchets ready at his sides.

It wasn't long before they came upon another doorway, this one carved into the rock with delicate dwarven runes along its archway. Unlike the battered, half-ruined rooms they had passed before, this door was solid stone, standing slightly ajar.

Ogar pushed against it, the weight of centuries resisting him for a moment before the door groaned open, revealing a chamber untouched by time.

Inside, the air was still, thick with the scent of aged parchment, ink, and dust. The walls were lined with shelves and cabinets, filled with rows upon rows of ancient books, their leather bindings cracked with age, but still standing strong.

Brokk let out a low whistle. "By the gods… a library."

Tormli ran a hand over a shelf, sending dust swirling into the air. "This place is older than any record I've seen in the hold. Ain't been touched in centuries."

Ogar stepped forward, his fingers brushing over the spines of the books, his heart beating faster. The old kings had built more than just mines and halls down here.

“They left behind their knowledge.”

Without another word, the three of them set about opening the cabinets, carefully pulling out books, and gathering around an old, timeworn stone table. The dim light of their torches flickered against forgotten words, their voices hushed in reverence as they opened the tomes and began to read.

Ogar cracked open the thickest book on the table, its gold-etched cover bearing the crest of Baldric Stonefather, the First King of the Dwarves. The pages were heavy, filled with ancient dwarven script, the words both familiar and strange.

He read aloud:

"To be of the Mountain is to be of Stone. Stone does not waver, nor does it falter. As the mountain is firm, so too must a dwarf be steadfast in honor and kinship. A king is not a ruler, but a keeper. He does not own the mountain; he is merely its guardian, entrusted by the blood of his kin."

Ogar’s brow furrowed. “Hmph. Ain’t heard it put like that before.”

Tormli nodded. “Most kings talk like they own the place. This says the king’s just borrowing it from the dead.”

Brokk tapped the next passage, reading:

"No dwarf may claim the earth’s bounty without toil. The wealth of the mountain is not given, but earned. And he who takes without honor shall find his hands crushed by stone."

The three dwarves exchanged glances.

Ogar exhaled, closing the book. “No wonder this was put in a sealed library. Too many kings forget who the mountain really belongs to.”

Tormli had pulled down a thinner book, its cover blackened, its title barely legible. He flipped through its pages, his expression darkening.

“This… ain’t a book of honor. This is a list of traitors.”

Ogar leaned in. “Aye?”

Tormli ran a finger along a list of names, each followed by a mark of exile or execution. Some were clan leaders who had sold their kin to invaders, others were smiths who had forged weapons for enemies of the dwarves.

But then—his finger paused on a name.

“Wait. This one’s marked as erased.” Ogar frowned. “Erased?” Brokk leaned in. “Aye. Some clans weren’t just exiled—they were wiped from history.”

Tormli swallowed. “But if they were erased… what happened to them?” A heavy silence hung between them. They closed the book.

Some secrets, perhaps, were better left unread.

Brokk picked up a book wrapped in thick, iron-bound leather, flipping through the detailed sketches of tunnels and veins.

"This," he muttered, eyes glinting, "is a master miner’s bible."

The book contained maps of mineral-rich veins, techniques for digging through unstable rock, and instructions on how to identify hidden pockets of rare ore.

One passage stood out:

"The deepest veins do not merely hold gold and silver, but the bones of the world itself. Dig too deep, and one may find riches… or ruin. Some tunnels are meant to be carved. Others are meant to be left undisturbed."

Ogar frowned. "Sounds like a warning."

Brokk scoffed. "Bah. All miners have warnings. Doesn’t mean we stop diggin’." Ogar wasn’t so sure.

Tormli opened a book of songs, running a finger over the ancient lyrics.

"Here’s a proper one," he muttered. Then, with a grin, he sang:

"Steel in me hand, stone at me back,
A mug in me grip, the orcs I attack!
They come, they fall, they cry, they bleed,
But none can match a dwarf’s great speed!"*

Ogar snorted, shaking his head. "Aye, that’s a song fer drinkin’, not fightin’."

Tormli shrugged. "Same difference."

Ogar picked up a strange book, its pages filled with a smith’s philosophy.

"When a dwarf strikes steel, he leaves behind a whisper of his will. The hammer remembers. Every dent, every heat, every fold of metal carries a part of its maker’s soul. This is why dwarven weapons last longer than the men who wield them."

Brokk tapped the page. "Aye. We don’t just make things. We pass down memory."

Ogar nodded. "The mountain remembers."

Tormli opened the last book, skimming over the strange words about kingship.

"A true dwarven king must be blessed threefold: By steel, by stone, and by spirit. Without these, his rule is empty."

Brokk grumbled. "Hmph. Sounds like politics."

Ogar raised an eyebrow. "Maybe. Or maybe we ain't had a real king in centuries."

After hours of reading, the three dwarves finally stood, stretching their aching backs.

They had uncovered secrets, songs, and warnings—but they weren't here for books alone.

There was still more to explore. Ogar looked at his companions. "We go deeper," he said.

Tormli and Brokk nodded. And so, they took their torches, their weapons, and their knowledge…

And stepped into the darkness once more.

The tunnel stretched ahead of them, its black maw splitting into multiple paths, each leading deeper into the forgotten halls of the mountain. Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk paused, their torchlight illuminating the ancient stonework, debating their next move.

Brokk scratched his beard, eyeing the dark corridors. "Ain't no tellin' where these go."

Ogar studied the old dwarven carvings along the tunnel walls. Many were worn beyond recognition, but some symbols still lingered—marks of passage, clan insignias, warnings perhaps.

"Left," Ogar said, pointing to the widest path.

Tormli snorted. "Aye? That based on experience or yer gut?"

Ogar shrugged. "Same thing."

With no better options, they turned left and continued deeper into the unknown.

After a minute of walking, the tunnel widened into a large, eerie cavern. Their torchlight revealed a grotesque sight—

Bones.

Hundreds of bleached white bones, arranged haphazardly, some stacked in crude piles, others woven together into strange formations.

And in the center of the chamber, there sat a chair of bones.

It was no true throne, yet whoever had built it clearly meant for it to resemble one. Skulls lined the armrests, rib bones formed the backrest, and large femurs supported the frame.

But it wasn't the chair itself that made the dwarves pause.

It was the creature sitting in it.

A lizard-like humanoid, covered in dark green and brown scales, sat on the makeshift throne, a clay bowl in its clawed hands, idly chewing on some unknown meat.

Its yellow eyes were focused downward, lost in thought, its long, muscular tail curled around the base of the chair.

The dwarves froze.

The lizard had yet to notice them.

Tormli slowly leaned toward Ogar. "What in the name of the stone is that?"

Brokk gripped his axe. "Ain't no goblin, that's for sure."

But before they could decide what to do next, the lizard lifted its head.

It saw them.

Its yellow eyes narrowed, its brow furrowing, but it did not leap to attack. Instead, it simply watched them, gripping its bowl tighter.

Not with hostility. But with wary uncertainty. Ogar raised a hand. "Hold there, lizard. What are ye?"

The creature hissed, but it was not an aggressive sound—more of a sharp exhale, like someone gathering their thoughts. Then it spoke.

"Who… are you?"

Its voice was rough, but understandable, though it rolled the words strangely, as if dwarvish was not its natural tongue.

Ogar and the others exchanged glances. This wasn't some beast. This was something more.

Ogar took a step forward, keeping his hand near his sword but not drawing it.

"We are dwarves of the mountain," he said. "Miners, warriors, and keepers of stone. Who are you?"

The lizard man's tail twitched, his clawed fingers tapping against the side of his bowl.

"I am Ouza."

Brokk's eyes narrowed. "Ye got a name?"

Ouza blinked, tilting his head. "Of course."

Tormli muttered, “This just got a whole lot stranger.”

Ogar nodded toward the bone chair. “Ye sittin’ like a king. This yer throne?”

Ouza let out a short, dry hiss, a sound that almost resembled laughter.

“This? No. This is… a seat. Nothing more.”

Ogar folded his arms. “And where do ye come from, Ouza? There ain’t been lizard folk in these mountains before.”

Ouza shifted, his eyes darting toward the tunnels beyond. For a long moment, he hesitated—as if deciding whether to speak.

Then, with a slow exhale, he began.

“Long ago,” Ouza said, “when the short-stone ones left these halls, there were only empty tunnels, deep places, and silence. The great mountain beasts wandered the dark. The things that do not breathe still whispered in the cracks of the stone.”

Ogar’s brow furrowed. “The short-stone ones?”

Tormli frowned. “He means dwarves.”

Ouza nodded. “Yes. The short-stone ones carved these places, then left. And when they left, the tunnels became lost to time.

"But we, the People of the Deep Scales, came much later.”

Brokk leaned on his axe. “And why’s that?”

Ouza’s yellow eyes gleamed.

“The surface world burns and floods. It kills. It hunts. The sun is not kind to our kind. We are made for the damp earth, for the tunnels, for the silence of the stone.”

Ogar nodded slowly. He had heard legends of creatures hiding in the underworld, avoiding the light of the sun. But this was the first time he’d met one.

“So ye took the tunnels after the dwarves abandoned ‘em?”

Ouza nodded. “We found the stone halls empty. We took them for shelter, for food, for safety. Some tunnels lead to greater places, some to death. But we listen to the earth’s whispers. We know where we belong.”

Tormli crossed his arms. “And what about the goblins? Ye friendly with ‘em?”

Ouza snorted, a sound like dry leaves rustling. “No. They scurry like vermin. They have no mind, only hunger. They come, they steal, they take what is not theirs.”

Brokk grinned. “Aye. That’s one thing we agree on.”

The dwarves sat with Ouza for a while, exchanging questions and answers, learning more about the lizard folk.

From what they gathered, the lizard people had been living in the deep places for generations, avoiding conflict, surviving in the dark places the dwarves had left behind.

They were not invaders.

They were simply another kind of folk, making their home where they could.

Ogar, though suspicious, saw no reason to fight Ouza. He was no enemy. But the tunnels were vast.

And if the lizard folk had taken these halls, it meant there was still much more to discover.

Ogar stood, adjusting his helmet. “We go deeper.”

Ouza tilted his head. “Then beware, dwarves. The mountain remembers. And some things should not be disturbed.”

Brokk smiled. “Aye, so we keep hearin’.”

The air in the bone chamber remained still as Ouza leaned forward, his yellow eyes gleaming with intent. His long clawed fingers tapped against the rim of his empty bowl, a silent rhythm of thought.

"You three," he said at last, "may be more useful than I thought."

Ogar arched a brow, arms crossed. "Aye? And how’s that?"

Ouza leaned forward, his scaled tail curling slightly around his chair.

"There is… a task I would offer you," the lizard-man hissed, his tone measured. "A relic. An old dwarven artifact, hidden in a chamber not far from here. I seek it. But… I cannot retrieve it myself."

Tormli narrowed his eyes. "What kind of artifact?"

Ouza’s claws flexed slightly before he spoke again. "An eye. Stone-carved. A thing that still sees, even after centuries."

Ogar frowned, exchanging a glance with Brokk. "What do ye mean, it still sees?"

Ouza exhaled slowly. "I do not know the full truth, but I have… felt its presence. It is embedded within a dwarven statue, in a room of old warriors. A place where your kind once watched over these tunnels."

Brokk huffed, shifting his grip on his axe. "And why do ye want it?"

Ouza's expression remained unreadable. "Curiosity. Study. I believe it still holds power—power I would understand."

Tormli scratched his beard, mulling over the offer. "And what happens if we don't bring ye the eye?"

Ouza shrugged, his scales glinting in the torchlight. "Then it remains where it is, watching the dark, waiting for someone else to claim it."

Ogar narrowed his eyes. He didn't trust Ouza, not fully—but he wasn't entirely against taking the job either. An ancient dwarven relic sounded like something worth investigating.

And besides, he didn't like the idea of a forgotten statue watching them from the shadows.

"Aye," Ogar said, rolling his shoulders. "We'll get yer stone eye."

Ouza's lips curled back in a toothy smile. "Then go, dwarves. And tread carefully. Some things… do not like to be disturbed."

The barracks was close—no more than a short walk through a collapsed tunnel, where the stone had cracked just enough to allow passage.

The air was heavier here, thick with the scent of dust, rusted iron, and time long forgotten. Their boots crunched against broken stone, the walls lined with carved dwarven banners, shields, and faded murals depicting old watchmen.

"This was a warrior's hall," Brokk muttered, running a hand over a rusted axe mounted to the wall. "Once upon a time."

Ogar studied the rows of stone bunks, some still holding crumbled remnants of armor, helmets long abandoned.

Tormli stopped at a large archway leading into a central chamber. "This is it," he said, nodding inside.

They stepped forward, and their torchlight revealed the centerpiece of the room.

At the far end of the barracks, against a raised stone dais, stood a massive dwarven statue.

The figure was carved from black granite, its hands resting on the pommel of an enormous stone warhammer, its beard etched with intricate braids. The armor it wore was ancient, detailed with long-forgotten insignias.

But it was the eyes that drew their attention.

One was empty, the hollow socket staring lifelessly. The other was not stone. It was a gem, smooth and dark, embedded deep into the statue's face. Ogar exhaled sharply. "There it is."

Tormli stepped closer, staring at the strange stone eye. "Ouza said this thing could still see." Brokk grunted, gripping his belt. "Hmph. Well, if we're takin' it, best we do it quick."

Ogar approached first, resting a hand against the statue's cold surface. "Feels solid. It ain't gonna crumble easy."

Tormli pulled out a small chisel and tapped it against the edge of the eye socket. "Gonna have to pry it free."

Ogar nodded. "Then let's—"

And then the air changed.

A deep, rumbling vibration thrummed through the stone beneath their feet—subtle at first, but growing.

Brokk froze, his grip tightening on his axe. "Did ye feel that?" Then, suddenly— A low grinding sound echoed through the barracks. Ogar's breath caught in his throat. "The hells was that?" Then the statue moved.

With an ear-splitting crack, the granite warrior shifted, its massive stone hands flexing, dust falling from its ancient joints. The eye socket where the stone had been removed now glowed dimly, and the head turned toward them.

A deep, resonant voice rumbled from within its chest—cold, hollow, a voice from another time. "Intruders."

Tormli stumbled back. "Bloody hells! It's alive?!"

The guardian's stone hammer lifted.

Ogar barely had time to shout a warning before the statue lunged forward, swinging its massive weapon.

The dwarves scattered as the warhammer slammed into the ground, shaking the entire chamber with a thunderous crash.

Brokk cursed, rolling out of the way. "It thinks we're invaders!"

Ogar gritted his teeth, drawing his sword. "Then we put it down!"

The statue-guardian moved with unnatural force, its limbs grinding like old gears, but its blows were relentless.

Ogar dashed left, swinging his sword against its leg, but the blade barely left a scratch.

Tormli hurled one of his hatchets, the blade clinking uselessly off its granite shoulder.

Brokk snarled, rushing forward, slamming his axe against the knee joint, but it held firm.

"It’s too damned solid!" Tormli shouted, dodging another earth-shaking strike.

Ogar’s mind raced. Then he saw it. The eye socket.

"The eye!" he roared. "It woke when we took the eye! Put it back!"

Tormli grabbed the stone eye from his belt, scrambling toward the statue’s face.

Brokk and Ogar held the creature’s attention, swinging and dodging its blows, their weapons barely slowing it down.

With one final leap, Tormli shoved the eye back into its place.

A deep pulse of energy surged through the statue, its movements suddenly halting mid-swing.

Then, with a low, grinding exhale, the guardian’s limbs locked into place.

Its head turned slightly, its gaze now neutral, watching, but no longer hostile.

Then, silence.

Ogar panted, staring at the motionless guardian.

"Well," he muttered. "That was a mistake."

Brokk wiped his brow, exhaling. "Aye. Guess we ain’t gettin’ that eye after all."

Tormli stepped back, glaring at the watching statue. "It ain’t worth dyin’ over."

Ogar sighed, shaking his head. "Let’s go tell Ouza the bad news."

With that, the three dwarves gathered their gear and left the old barracks, leaving the ancient guardian to its endless vigil.

Some things, it seemed, were never meant to be taken.

The dwarves returned to the bone chamber, where Ouza still sat upon his crude throne, his yellow eyes narrowing as he saw them empty-handed. He tilted his reptilian head, tail flicking idly as they approached.

"You do not carry the stone eye," he observed.

Ogar sighed, crossing his arms. "Aye. We tried. Got attacked by the guardian of the place. Big, mean, and made of stone. Nearly crushed us."

Tormli grunted. "Took the eye out, thing came to life. Put the eye back, thing went still. So unless ye want us crushed to paste, we ain’t bringin’ it."

Ouza’s gaze flickered for a moment, then he nodded. "I understand. Some things are too dangerous to claim."

Brokk wiped a layer of dust from his arms, still scowling. "Bah. Ye could've warned us, lizard."

Ouza let out a low, hissing chuckle. "Would you have refused the task, if I had?"

Ogar scowled but said nothing. Probably not.

Ouza stood, stretching his scaled limbs, before stepping closer to them. "Very well. No eye. But… perhaps you would be interested in another task?"

The three dwarves exchanged looks.

Tormli sighed. "Aye, what is it this time?"

Ouza's tail coiled slightly, his gaze darkening. "There is an old library within these tunnels… You may have already discovered it."

Ogar frowned. "Aye. We did. Read some good books there, too."

Ouza nodded. "Then you will know what I speak of when I say—there is something wrong with it."

Tormli's eyes narrowed. "Wrong how?"

Ouza's voice lowered. "There are whispers among the shelves. Books that move on their own. Pages that seem to shift when no one is looking. The air is colder than it should be, even in stone halls. Something lingers."

Brokk adjusted his belt. "Aye? And ye want us to find out what?"

Ouza gave a slow nod. "Yes. See if anything has been disturbed. If you find… a reason for these whispers, deal with it."

Ogar exhaled, rubbing his beard. "Another cursed place, then. Lovely."

Still, there was no backing down now.

The dwarves turned, stepping back into the tunnels once more, heading toward the haunted library, their torches flickering against the cold stone walls.

When they stepped back into the library chamber, the air was different than before.

The last time they had been here, the air had been stale, thick with dust and history.

Now? Now the air was cold.

Not the damp chill of deep tunnels, but something unnatural—the kind of cold that creeps into the bones, whispering of things long dead and forgotten.

Ogar felt it immediately. "Something's here, lads."

Tormli’s brow furrowed, his hands tightening on his hatchets. "I feel it too. A presence."

Brokk let out a slow breath, watching as it misted in the air. "Aye. This ain’t normal."

And then— A book fell from the shelf. A single tome, tumbling to the stone floor, landing with a soft thump. The dwarves froze.

Ogar lifted his torch, stepping forward. His eyes fell on the title of the book.

"Echoes of the Stone."

A thick leather-bound tome, its cover marked with dwarven runes, its edges slightly frayed.

Tormli exhaled. "Hells. That ain't ominous at all."

Ogar knelt, reaching for the fallen book. But as his fingers brushed the leather cover— A chill washed over him. The torchlight dimmed. And a figure appeared.

A dwarven spirit shimmered into existence, its form pale and translucent, standing just beyond the book.

It was cloaked in ancient robes, its long beard flowing like mist, its eyes hollow sockets filled with flickering blue fire.

And when it spoke, its voice was dry and distant, like parchment crumbling to dust.

"You… have found my book."

Ogar's breath slowed.

He knew a restless ghost when he saw one.

"We ain’t here to steal it," Ogar said carefully. "Just tryin’ to see what’s wrong in this place."

The spirit tilted its head. "The library is not wrong. The library is incomplete."

Tormli frowned. "Incomplete?"

The ghost’s hands twitched, its form shimmering uneasily.

"A page is missing. The book is not whole. I must find it. I must… I must… I must…"

Ogar and the others exchanged glances. The spirit was not hostile.

Brokk exhaled. "Fine. We’ll help ye find the damned page."

And so, the search began. For hours, they sifted through dusty tomes, opening ancient books, flipping through pages that had not seen the light in centuries. The missing page was nowhere to be found. The ghost flickered, growing more restless, its whispers turning into anxious mutters.

"The page must be found. The page must be found."

Finally— Tormli lifted an old ledger, flipping through worn pages, and there, tucked between its final entries, was a single sheet of parchment.

A fragment of the missing text. He handed it to the ghost. And for a moment, the spirit grew still.

Its hollow eyes stared at the page, its form flickering as it reached for the parchment with phantasmal fingers.

A breathless silence filled the room. And then— It let out a sigh. A deep, relieved sigh. "It is whole again."

The spirit's form began to fade, the air growing warmer once more. For a moment, it almost seemed as though the dwarves had done the right thing.

Until Brokk spoke. "Right, well," he said, grabbing the book from the floor. "We're takin' this one."

The spirit froze. And then— It screamed.

The library shook as the ghost's wail echoed through the halls, its form twisting into a wraith-like shape, its once calm expression turning into a mask of rage.

"The book is mine!" it howled, its hands stretching into clawed, spectral limbs.

Ogar barely had time to draw his sword before the spirit lashed out, its ghostly fingers raking across his chest—passing through his armor like mist, but leaving a searing cold pain in its wake.

Tormli ducked, swinging his hatchet, but it passed harmlessly through the spirit's body.

"It ain't solid!" he cursed. Brokk, still clutching the book, growled. "Then we hit it with magic!" Ogar gritted his teeth, grabbing a torch and hurling it at the ghost. The flame flashed brightly as it struck the spirit's form, the ghost letting out a horrid screech.

"Light! Fire! Use the torches!" With the ghost weakened, they struck, until finally— With one last howling cry, the spirit vanished, leaving only the book behind. The air was still once more. Brokk smiled, dusting off the tome. "Well, boys," he muttered, "that was worth it."

The three dwarves made their way back through the dark tunnels, their boots crunching over old stone, the air still carrying the last lingering chill of the ghostly battle in the library.

They were exhausted, but victorious.

Ouza was waiting for them in the bone chamber, lounging in his makeshift throne, his yellow eyes half-lidded in thought. As the dwarves entered, he flicked his tail and tilted his head.

"You have returned," he said smoothly. "And… the whispers?"

Ogar nodded. “Gone. The spirit is dealt with.”

Tormli grunted, setting his hatchets on his belt. “A damned scholar-ghost, of all things. Was searchin’ for a missing page for gods know how long. We found it, gave it back, and… well, let’s just say things got complicated.”

Brokk smiled, patting the thick tome now strapped to his belt. “But we walked away with a little extra.”

Ouza blinked, his tongue flicking for a brief moment. “Ah… you took the book?”

Brokk crossed his arms. “Course we did. Ghost was gone. Book weren’t doin’ no one any good, sittin’ there unread.”

Ouza let out a hissing chuckle. “You have strange ideas of ownership.”

Ogar rolled his shoulders. “Aye, well… so do lizards who live in dwarven halls.”

Ouza merely grinned, reaching into a small leather pouch at his side. He flicked a small bag toward Ogar, which the dwarf caught midair.

“A reward,” Ouza said. “For your… trouble.”

Ogar opened the pouch, revealing a handful of gold nuggets, smooth and weighty in his palm.

Tormli raised a brow. “Well, that’s unexpected.”

Brokk took one, bit it lightly, then grinned. “Aye. That’s real gold.”

Ogar tied the pouch to his belt, nodding. “Fair deal. We appreciate it.”

Ouza’s eyes gleamed. “And I appreciate results.”

Ouza stood, stretching his scaled limbs, then motioned toward a smaller passage.

“You have done well,” he said. “You may rest, if you wish. Eat. Drink. Restore yourselves.”

Tormli exhaled. “Aye. Could use a proper meal.”

Ouza led them into a side cavern, where two stone slabs served as a crude dining area. Near the center, a cooking pot bubbled over a fire pit, filling the air with a thick, earthy aroma.

Ouza gestured to the pot. “You may eat. Goblinoid meat… or fungi soup.”

Ogar and Brokk exchanged glances.

Tormli wrinkled his nose. “Aye, we’ll take the soup.”

Ouza merely nodded.

He ladled thick portions into clay bowls, handing them to the dwarves. The soup was a rich, dark broth, filled with plump cave fungi, root vegetables, and a hint of something smoky.

Ogar took a bite, chewing thoughtfully.

Tormli followed, then blinked in surprise. “Hells… that ain’t bad.”

Brokk grunted, swallowing a mouthful. “Better than half the taverns topside.”

Ouza smiled, settling onto a stone ledge. “The underground provides, if one knows where to look.”

For the first time since entering the abandoned tunnels, the dwarves relaxed, eating their strange but satisfying meal, the warmth chasing away the chill of restless ghosts.

But rest would not last long.

After they finished, Ouza stood again, motioning toward another passage.

“Come,” he said. “There is a place you may wash. Water from the mountain itself.”

The dwarves followed him through a narrow tunnel, emerging into a large cavern, where the sound of rushing water echoed against the walls.

A subterranean river flowed through the stone, its waters crystal clear, pooling into a large basin of dark water.

Tormli exhaled. “Well, that’s a sight.”

Brokk rolled his shoulders. “Aye. Could use a wash.”

The three dwarves set down their gear, stripping off their leather armor and boots, stepping into the cool water.

It was refreshing, the ache in their muscles easing as they soaked in the mountain’s depths.

But then— Something moved beneath the water. A swift shadow, gliding through the pool’s depths, circling them. Ogar tensed. “The hell was that?” Then—a sensual touch.

A strange, scaled hand brushed against Ogar’s back, then against Brokk’s arm, then Tormli’s leg, lingered there for a bit too long.

The dwarves flinched, but before they could react—

The figure broke the surface.

A female lizard-like creature, sleek and sinuous, naked, emerged from the water, her long limbs moving effortlessly as she crawled onto the rocks.

She did not stand upright, but instead moved on all fours, her clawed fingers and toes gripping the stone as she scaled the cavern wall, her yellow eyes never leaving them.

Then, without a word, she disappeared into a side tunnel, her body vanishing into the darkness.

The dwarves stood frozen, staring.

Tormli broke the silence first. "… What. The. Hells?"

Ogar turned slowly to Ouza, who was watching with amusement.

"Nothing to fear," Ouza said, his voice smooth.

Brokk gaped at him. "NOTHING TO FEAR?! THAT THING WAS CRAWLIN' AROUND LIKE A DAMNED SPIDER!"

Ouza's tail flicked. "That was my sister." The dwarves stared. Tormli shook his head. "By the gods, I need another drink."

After drying off and gathering their things, the dwarves settled down near the fire once more.

Brokk pulled out the book they had taken from the library, Echoes of the Stone, flipping through its ancient, yellowed pages.

Ogar leaned forward. "Well? What's in it?" Brokk scanned the text, frowning.

"This ain't just a book about stonework," he muttered. "It's… strange."

He flipped to a marked page, then read aloud:

"Stone remembers. The deeper one goes, the more it listens. In the tunnels untouched by light, in the walls never broken by picks, the rock itself breathes, waiting to be heard."

Ogar frowned. "That sounds almost alive."

Brokk turned another page.

"There are places where stone is more than earth. Places where it does not merely sit—it whispers. It watches. It changes."

Tormli exhaled. "Well, that's unsettling."

Brokk flipped to the final passage, his voice dropping lower as he read.

"There is a place. A deep place. A place where the stone does not obey the mountain. It moves when it should not. It shifts in ways that are not natural. Those who listen to its voice… do not return."

Silence filled the chamber. Ogar slowly sat back. "Well," he muttered. "That's ominous."

Brokk closed the book, setting it down. “Aye.” Tormli shook his head. “And we’re still going deeper, aren’t we?” Ogar smiled. “Aye. We are.” Because now, they had even more questions. And deep below the mountain, the stone was waiting. The time had come to leave Ouza behind—for now.

Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk gathered their gear, adjusted their armor, and exchanged a final nod with the lizard-man.

Ouza, reclining in his bone seat, flicked his tail lazily, his yellow eyes half-lidded in thought.

“You leave so soon?” he mused. Ogar smiled. “Aye. We didn’t come down here to sit around.”

Tormli shouldered his hatchets, rolling his aching shoulders. “Still a damn lot of tunnels left unexplored.”

Brokk grunted, flexing his fingers around his axe handle. “And more things to kill.”

Ouza let out a soft, hissing chuckle. “Then go, dwarves. Go deeper. But remember…”

He leaned forward slightly.

“The stone has its own memory. You walk paths that have been walked before. And some will not welcome you.”

Ogar scoffed. “Aye, we’ve noticed.”

With that, the three turned from the chamber, stepping back into the cold stone tunnels, leaving Ouza and his strange kind behind. They didn’t look back.

The tunnel ahead sloped downward, a slow but steady descent into the depths of the earth.

Ogar could feel it now—that weight in the air, the pressure of the mountain above them, the sense that they were truly leaving the upper world behind.

And then— They saw it. More dwarven stonework.

Not just a hallway, not just a small living area—but architecture.

Pillars. Archways. Grand stone bridges carved into the walls of immense tunnels.

The three dwarves slowed their steps, gazing in silent awe.

Tormli whistled, running a hand along the intricate carvings on one of the pillars. “This… ain’t just old quarters.”

Brokk nodded, gripping his axe. “Aye. This is a damned city.”

Ogar’s heart beat faster. If they had found an underground dwarven city… what had happened to it? Who had lived here?

And more importantly—who lived here now?

Their questions were answered sooner than expected.

As they turned a corner, the tunnel opened into a long passage, lined with ornate dwarven columns. And then they saw something strange.

Torches.

Flickering flames, burning bright. “Someone’s been here,” Ogar muttered.

Brokk scowled. “Aye. And they ain’t us.”

The dwarves drew their weapons, moving forward cautiously.

Then— A shadow shifted. A whisper. And suddenly, they were not alone.

From the dark recesses of the tunnel, five figures emerged—broad-shouldered, armored in dark steel, their skin a sickly gray, their eyes gleaming red in the torchlight.

Duergar.

The twisted kin of the dwarves. The ones who had forsaken the surface, who had become creatures of the deep dark, hardened by slavery, war, and cruel gods.

One of them, wielding a brutal war hammer, sneered at them.

“More weaklings from the surface?”

Ogar tightened his grip on his sword. “Aye. And what of it, ye gray-skinned bastard?”

The Duergar grinned, showing rotten teeth.

“Then ye’ll die here.”

And with that, the fight began.

The first Duergar charged straight at Ogar, swinging his hammer in a wide arc.

Ogar barely managed to raise his sword, catching the blow at an angle—but the sheer force sent him stumbling back, his skull ringing as pain shot through his arms.

Before he could react, the next one was already on him.

The second Duergar lunged, dagger flashing, and Ogar barely turned in time to parry, steel scraping against steel.

Tormli and Brokk had their own hands full.

Tormli clashed with two Duergar at once, his hatchets flashing, but they were strong—almost as strong as they.

One of them managed to dodge a swing, stabbing Tormli in the back.

Tormli roared in pain, spinning and burying his hatchet into the bastard's face, splitting his skull like a melon.

But blood dripped down his back, and he gritted his teeth.

Brokk was locked in a brutal exchange, his axe clashing against a Duergar's sword, both fighters brawling in close quarters, trading heavy blows.

The Duergar headbutted him, sending Brokk staggering, and then came the dagger to the thigh—deep, almost crippling.

Brokk snarled, bringing his axe down with all his might.

CRACK.

The gray dwarf's skull caved in, and he collapsed in a heap.

Ogar, meanwhile, had taken a brutal hammer strike to the side of his head, his vision going white for a moment, his ears ringing like a forge bell.

The world tilted. He almost blacked out. The Duergar lifted his hammer for a finishing blow —

But before he could bring it down, Ogar lunged forward, ignoring the pain, driving his sword straight through the bastard's gut.

The gray dwarf gasped, eyes widening, before Ogar ripped the blade free, sending him crumbling to the stone. One Duergar remained.

Realizing he was alone, the final gray dwarf hesitated, then snarled.

"I'll see ye all in the deep hells—"

Brokk, bleeding from his leg, cut him off mid-sentence with a swing of his axe, taking his head clean off.

The Duergar's body slumped. Silence fell. Ogar swayed on his feet, his head still spinning, his skull throbbing from the hammer blow.

Tormli leaned against the stone wall, his back wound bleeding freely, his face pale.

Brokk grunted, clutching his leg wound, sweat dripping down his face. "Well," he muttered, panting. "That was damned close."

Ogar spat blood, blinking away the dizziness. "They were strong bastards."

Tormli chuckled weakly. “Almost as strong as us.”

Brokk grinned, teeth bloodied. “But not strong enough.”

Ogar wiped his blade, glancing down the long, torch-lit corridor ahead.

If the Duergar were down here, it meant only one thing— They weren’t alone in this city. And worse things might be waiting further ahead.

The three dwarves sat against the cold stone walls, their breathing heavy, their bodies aching from the brutal fight with the Duergar ambush.

Ogar groaned, pressing a hand against his temple, where the hammer blow had nearly caved his skull in. “Damn bastards hit hard.”

Tormli, still bleeding from the stab wound in his back, winced as he adjusted his position. “Aye. We got lucky.”

Brokk growled, wrapping a strip of cloth tightly around his leg wound. “Luck had nothin’ to do with it. We’re just meaner than they are.”

Ogar reached into his belt pouch, pulling free the small glass vial Mara had given him before they descended into the deep tunnels.

Tormli nodded toward it. “That yer healin’ potion?”

“Aye,” Ogar muttered, uncorking it and taking a long drink.

The bitterness of the herbs hit his tongue, followed by a slow, warm burn spreading through his body. His vision steadied, the worst of the pain fading.

Ogar wiped his mouth. “Ain’t a full fix, but it’ll keep me standin’.”

Tormli and Brokk tightened their bandages, took a final swig of their waterskins, then exchanged glances. No words were needed. They weren’t done yet.

They rose to their feet, picked up their weapons, and ventured deeper into the tunnels.

The passage ahead sloped downward, opening into a large stone chamber, where their torchlight revealed a sight both tragic and grim.

A vault. But not just any vault. A royal vault.

The walls were lined with rusted ceremonial armor, their plates covered in dust and cobwebs. At the far end of the chamber, beneath a crumbling stone arch, lay a tattered royal banner, its deep crimson faded, yet still bearing the sigil of a long-lost dwarven king.

And there, resting against an altar of black stone, was a broken crown.

The golden band was cracked, its once-proud runes barely flickering with the last remnants of an enchantment long faded.

Tormli knelt, running his fingers across the rusted armor. “This… this ain’t just any dwarven hall. This was a king’s vault.”

Brokk stepped closer to the crown, his eyes narrowing. “Aye. But look at this.”

A stone plaque, carved in the harsh, jagged runes of the Duergar language, had been placed beside the altar.

Ogar leaned in, his lips twisting in a scowl as he read aloud:

“Here lies the fool-king, whose greed for gold led him to ruin. Let his fate serve as warning to those who challenge the Deep.”

Tormli clenched his jaw. “The bastards entombed him here as a mockery.”

Brokk’s grip tightened on his axe. “Duergar don’t just kill ye. They make sure your legacy dies too.”

Ogar reached down, picking up the cracked crown, its runes flickering weakly in the dim torchlight.

“This ain’t just some relic,” he muttered. “If we take this back, we take back somethin’ they tried to erase.”

Tormli nodded. “Aye. Dwarven honor’s worth fightin’ for.”

Brokk pulled out his pack, opening it. “Let’s bag it and—”

Then, without thinking, he stepped backward—

CRASH.

Brokk’s shoulder slammed into an old armor stand, sending a rusted breastplate and helmet clattering to the ground, the metal ringing against the stone.

Ogar’s eyes went wide. Tormli froze. The sound echoed through the tunnels. And then— Heavy footsteps. Harsh, guttural voices. And before they could react— Four Duergar stormed into the vault.

The gray-skinned dwarves bared their jagged teeth, their red eyes flashing in the torchlight.

One of them, a scarred brute wielding a cruel-looking war axe, sneered at them. “More thieves from the surface, diggin’ where they shouldn’t.”

Ogar growled, drawing his sword. “Aye. And I’ll be diggin’ your grave next.”

The Duergar charged. The fight exploded into pure, brutal chaos.

Ogar barely had time to raise his sword before the scarred Duergar swung his axe in a vicious arc.

Ogar dodged, but not fast enough—the blade clipped his shoulder, cutting through leather and skin, sending a searing pain down his arm.

He staggered, but didn't fall. Instead, he roared, charging forward and slamming his pommel into the Duergar's face.

The gray dwarf snarled, spitting blood and a broken tooth—then swung again.

Ogar caught the haft of the axe with his left hand, wrenching it aside, then drove his forehead into the bastard's nose. CRACK.

The Duergar reeled back, dazed— And that was when Ogar buried his sword deep into his gut, twisting the blade. The Duergar choked, eyes bulging—then collapsed.

Tormli faced off against a faster Duergar, one wielding two short swords, darting in and out like a shadow. The gray dwarf lunged, slicing Tormli across the arm, drawing a thin line of blood. Tormli gritted his teeth. "Ye filthy gray-skinned rat!"

The Duergar smiled. "Too slow." Tormli faked a stumble. The Duergar moved in for the kill.

And that's when Tormli pivoted, swinging his hatchet low—burying it right into the bastard's knee. The Duergar screamed, falling to the ground. Tormli wasted no time.

He grabbed the enemy's own short sword—and rammed it into his throat.

Blood spattered across the stone.

Brokk was locked in a brutal grappling match with a heavyset Duergar, both of them fighting like brawlers in a pit fight.

The gray dwarf slammed a fist into Brokk's ribs.

Brokk retaliated by headbutting him so hard his nose shattered.

"Ye ugly goblin-fucker!" Ogar shouted, slashing his sword through another Duergar's chest.

Brokk laughed mid-fight. "Aye, what he said!"

The Duergar warrior snarled, swinging his hammer in a deadly arc.

Brokk caught the handle mid-swing, using his own strength to twist it aside.

Then, with a final brutal strike, Brokk swung his axe straight into the Duergar's skull.

The gray dwarf fell, twitching. The last Duergar stood alone, panting, covered in wounds. Seeing his brothers slain, he bared his rotting teeth in a bloody snarl. "Ye'll all burn in the Deep."

Ogar wiped his blade clean. “Aye. But ye’ll be there first.”

Tormli and Brokk stepped forward— And in one final strike, they cut the last Duergar down. Silence fell. Ogar wiped the blood from his face, breathing hard.

Tormli rolled his shoulders, wincing. “We need to stop gettin’ into these messes.”

Brokk picked up the broken crown, placing it carefully in his bag. “Aye. But if we’re stealin’ back history, might as well do it right.”

Ogar chuckled. “Let’s get outta here.”

And so, covered in blood, aching with wounds, but victorious, the three dwarves left the vault of the Fool-King, stepping further into the lost city of stone.

The deeper they ventured into the ruins of the Duergar city, the more the air felt tainted—thick with old magic, cruelty, and curses left to fester.

Blood still dripped from their fresh wounds, their armor torn, their bodies aching. The Duergar had fought them brutally, but the dwarves pressed on—each step carrying them deeper into the lost stronghold.

Then, in the lower depths, they came upon a chamber unlike the others.

The hall was empty, eerily quiet—but before them stood a massive iron door, its surface etched with glowing runes.

Tormli narrowed his eyes. "A prison."

Brokk ran a hand over the stone around it, his fingers brushing deep cracks. "Aye. And a damned old one."

Ogar stepped forward, studying the intricate wards carved into the metal.

Each rune pulsed faintly with a blue shimmer, the magic still holding strong after centuries.

“Whoever’s locked in here,” he muttered, “the Duergar wanted ‘em to stay in.”

Tormli’s fingers hovered over one of the symbols. "These ain't just locks. This is somethin'... different."

Then— A voice. But it did not come from beyond the door. It came inside their minds.

“You are not like them. Perhaps… we can make a deal.”

The dwarves stiffened, their hands instinctively moving toward their weapons. Ogar exhaled slowly. "Who are ye?" The voice was calm, unhurried, almost amused. “Open the door, and I shall tell you.”

Ogar, Brokk, and Tormli exchanged wary glances. Tormli scowled. "This could be a trap."

Brokk grunted. "Aye. But if it’s a prisoner of the Duergar, they might not be fond o’ them gray-skinned bastards either."

Ogar turned back to the door. “Fine. Tell us how.”

The voice spoke again, whispering the secret to breaking the ward.

"Fire from your torch, and these words: Ilthar’si vel’nar. The flame will burn away the seal.”

Ogar lifted his torch, watching as the firelight reflected against the runes.

Taking a breath, he spoke the words: “Ilthar’si vel’nar.”

The effect was immediate.

The blue glow of the runes flickered—then shattered like glass, the fragments vanishing into the air.

A heavy silence followed. Tormli exhaled. "Well, that was easy enough."

Brokk lifted his axe. "Not done yet. The damned locks are still here."

Ogar drew his sword, wedging the blade into one of the rusted locks, twisting hard until it snapped.

Tormli followed, hacking at the remaining chains until the last lock broke free.

The door groaned as they forced it open.

And inside— They saw him. Sitting in the darkness, his form gaunt, thin, and otherworldly, was an elf. But not like the elves of the surface.

His skin was pale, almost colorless, his long hair silver like frost, and his red eyes glowed dimly in the dark.

He looked calm, as if he had been waiting.

And when he spoke, it was with the same echoing voice that had touched their minds before.

"At last," he murmured, standing with effortless grace. "You have freed me."

Ogar gripped his sword. "Aye. Now tell us who ye are."

The elf tilted his head slightly. "I was once Iltherion of the Sunless Court. But that name means little now."

Brokk snorted. "Ye've been down here a long time, then."

Iltherion’s red eyes flickered. "A very long time."

Then, without another word, he raised a hand.

A soft light spread from his palm, washing over the dwarves.

Warmth surged through their bodies.

Their wounds closed.

Pain faded.

Even the exhaustion of battle lifted, as though they had rested for days.

Tormli let out a long breath. "By the gods… that's the best magic I ever felt."

Ogar rolled his shoulders, feeling his strength fully return. "Aye. Guess we got lucky."

Iltherion's expression remained unreadable. "Consider it thanks. And now, I will give you something more."

The elf stepped forward, his eyes gleaming with an eerie light.

"The Duergar hoard their greatest treasures in vaults deeper within the city. But you will find that their inner doors are not of stone and metal alone."

Ogar frowned. "Explain."

Iltherion lifted a single hand, tracing a pattern in the air.

"Duergar vaults are sealed by runes of greed—magic that demands an offering before opening. But they are fools. They use words they do not fully understand."

His voice became a low whisper.

"The words to break their greed are: 'Ur-Kal'za, Dura-Keth.' Speak them, and the doors will obey."

Tormli exhaled. "Sounds too easy."

Iltherion smiled, revealing slightly sharpened teeth. "Perhaps."

Brokk crossed his arms. "And what do you want?"

The elf tilted his head. "Nothing. I am leaving this place. And you…"

His eyes gleamed in the dim light.

"Will have your own fate to chase."

Ogar narrowed his eyes. "So that's it? Ye just vanish?"

Iltherion smiled. And then, before their eyes— He did.

His form faded into mist, his body dissolving into shadow, until only the faintest echo of his voice lingered in the air.

"May the mountain remember you well…"

Then— He was gone.

The dwarves stood quietly, staring at the empty space where the elf had stood. Tormli was the first to break the silence. "Well. That was… unsettling."

Brokk shook his head. "Aye. I don't like elves, but that one was useful."

Ogar clenched his fist. "We got somethin' outta it. Now we know how to open the vault."

Tormli smiled. "Aye. And I wouldn't mind lootin' the Duergar's own hoards after all the hell they put us through."

Brokk chuckled darkly. "Then let's go rob the gray-skinned bastards blind."

Ogar nodded, gripping his sword. "Aye. Let's see if that elf's words hold true."

And with that, the three dwarves stepped deeper into the Duergar ruins, toward the vault of the city's stolen treasures.

The secrets of the mountain were beginning to unravel.

And the dwarves were ready for whatever came next.

Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk stood in the dark depths of the Duergar city, gripping their weapons as they surveyed the streets of the gray dwarves before them.

The city was too alive, too populated. There were too many Duergar patrols, too many eyes, too much risk.

They couldn't simply march their way to the vault.

They needed to move like shadows.

The three dwarves moved low, pressing themselves against the cold stone walls, their breath shallow as they timed their movements with the shifting torchlight of the patrols.

A pair of Duergar guards walked past, their dark steel boots clanking against the ground.

The dwarves froze.

Ogar counted the steps—one, two, three—before the guards turned a corner.

Now.

They darted across the open tunnel, staying in the blind spots of the Duergar sentries.

Further ahead, they found themselves in a residential area.

Row after row of stone dwellings, some dark and silent, others glowing dimly with light from within.

Through the cracks of the stone doors, they could hear grumbling voices, snoring, and the clinking of tankards.

"Quiet now," Ogar whispered. "Step light, breathe less."

As they moved deeper into the district, the tunnels became narrower, their path leading through the sleeping chambers of the Duergar.

Brokk held up a hand, signaling them to stop.

A narrow passage ahead led through a barracks—rows of stone slabs where Duergar warriors lay sleeping, their weapons resting near their beds.

"Stone-cursed bastards sleep like the dead," Tormli muttered under his breath.

Ogar led the way, stepping carefully, placing his feet precisely between the gaps in the stonework to avoid making any sound.

One step. Another. A sleeping Duergar rolled over, muttering in his sleep. The dwarves froze. The gray dwarf snorted. Then rolled back over.

Ogar exhaled slowly, before motioning them forward.

One by one, they moved past the barracks, slipping through the tunnels unseen.

After what felt like hours of careful sneaking, they finally came upon a large chamber, its entrance guarded by two massive stone pillars, carved with runes of ownership and protection.

It looked like a vault. But something was off. Tormli ran his fingers over the inscriptions. "This ain't the city's grand vault. This is…"

Brokk smiled. "A noble's private stash."

Ogar chuckled. "Gold's gold. If it's locked up, it means there's somethin' worth takin'."

He turned toward the massive vault door, remembering the words the elf had taught them.

Taking a deep breath, he whispered: "Ur-Kal'za, Dura-Keth."

The runes shuddered. The heavy stone door trembled. And then, it cracked open.

The chamber was small, but filled with valuable treasures. Ogar's eyes scanned the stacks of riches— A sack of gold nuggets sat atop an iron chest, a necklace of deep red gemstones lay coiled beside it, and two golden rings gleamed faintly in the torchlight.

Near the back, they spotted a silver dagger, stashed away inside a blackened lockbox.

Tormli moved forward, grabbing the gold and rings, stuffing them into his bag.

Brokk reached for the necklace, turning it over in his calloused fingers. "Heavy. Probably enchanted."

Ogar eyed the silver dagger, reaching out to lift it from the lockbox.

The moment his fingers touched the lid— CLANK. Something shifted. A clicking noise echoed from within. Ogar's instincts screamed at him. He yanked his hand back just in time.

A hidden blade shot out from the side of the chest, slicing through the air where his wrist had been. SNAP. The mechanism jammed in place—missing its target. Ogar blinked, staring at the trap. "...Damn. That would've taken my whole hand."

Tormli let out a nervous chuckle. "Ye got too lucky."

Brokk grinned, reaching down and carefully disabling the trap before lifting the silver dagger.

"Bah, no use lettin' it go to waste." He tossed it to Ogar. "Ye nearly lost an arm for it. Might as well keep it."

Ogar turned the dagger over, admiring its fine craftsmanship.

The blade was razor-sharp, and the handle was carved with dwarven runes—a weapon made for ceremonial kills.

"Aye," he muttered. "I'll take it."

With their bags full of stolen gold and trinkets, the dwarves turned back toward the exit.

Ogar gave one last look at the Duergar noble's vault, shaking his head.

"Fools lock away their treasures while their city rots."

Tormli scoffed. "And we're makin' sure it don't go to waste."

Brokk chuckled, adjusting his loot bag. "Aye. Time to get outta here before we have to fight another damn army."

And with that, they slipped back into the tunnels, disappearing into the shadows of the ruined city.

Their prize was taken.

With their loot secured, Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk made their way back through the darkened tunnels of the Duergar city, keeping to the shadows, listening for the heavy boots of patrols.

They had pushed their luck enough.

It was time to return to the surface.

Step by step, they retraced their path, moving with the same careful silence they had used to enter.

At times, they had to press themselves against the walls, holding their breath as Duergar patrols passed within arm's reach.

One gray-skinned bastard paused mid-step, his head turning—a moment of hesitation.

Ogar's fingers twitched toward his blade.

But the Duergar grunted, muttered something in his native tongue, then kept walking.

Only when the patrol was gone did the dwarves exhale.

Tormli wiped the sweat from his brow. "Damn, we're cursed lucky today."

Brokk chuckled. "Or we just got better at sneakin'."

Ogar smiled, gripping his sword hilt. "Aye. But we ain't out yet."

They pressed on.

For hours, they moved upward, slowly climbing through the forgotten corridors of the deep.

The air grew lighter, fresher—a sign they were getting closer.

But the deep tunnels had one last challenge to throw at them.

As they passed into a narrow corridor, they heard it.

The scuttling.

Then the guttural snarling.

Ogar stopped dead. "That ain't good."

From the darkness ahead, two goblins emerged, crude blades in hand, their yellow eyes gleaming.

A third goblin perched atop a rock, its bow already drawn.

And then, from above—

A massive cave spider dropped from the ceiling.

Tormli growled. "Damn eight-legged bastards."

Brokk grinned, spinning his axe. "One last scrap before we leave? Fine by me."

The goblins charged first, their rusted blades flashing.

Ogar met them head-on, parrying the first, then ramming his shoulder into the second, sending it tumbling backward.

Tormli spun, his hatchets cleaving into the goblin archer, sending it sprawling with a scream.

Brokk ducked just in time as the spider lunged, its fangs barely missing his neck.

The creature hissed, its many eyes locking onto him.

Brokk grinned. "Come on, then!"

Ogar finished off his first goblin, slashing its throat, while Tormli grabbed the second by the arm and hacked it clean off.

The spider reared back, its fangs dripping venom, then lunged at Brokk again.

This time, Brokk was ready.

With a powerful swing, he buried his axe deep into the spider's head, splitting its chitinous skull.

The creature twitched violently—then collapsed.

The fight was over.

Ogar wiped his blade on a goblin's tunic, exhaling hard. "That's the last time we're fightin' in these tunnels."

Home sweet home

The moment they stepped into the higher tunnels of their home, the air felt different.

Warmer. Familiar.

The rough, brutal atmosphere of the Duergar city was gone, replaced by the sturdy stonework of proper dwarven hands.

Ogar exhaled, stretching his aching limbs. "Home sweet home."

Tormli grinned. "Aye. And ye know what that means."

Brokk laughed, already marching toward the tavern. "Darkbane an' a good meal."

Ogar nodded. "And coin in our pockets."

The Golden Beard was as loud and rowdy as ever.

Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk slammed their packs onto the table, drawing a few curious stares from nearby patrons.

They ordered three mugs of Darkbane, the strongest ale in the hold, then unloaded their findings.

The silver dagger was the first thing to go.

A local merchant dwarf, old and greedy, eyed it with keen interest. "Ain't seen craftsmanship like this in a long time… I'll give ye 20 gold."

Ogar raised a brow. "40."

"30," the merchant huffed.

Ogar leaned forward. "Ye see this scar on my wrist? Almost lost my damned hand to a Duergar trap tryin' to get this thing. 35."

The merchant grumbled. "Fine. 35 gold."

Tormli grinned, passing the dagger over and taking the coin.

They split their winnings, 35 gold from the dagger. The sack of gold nuggets—worth another 50 gold. The golden rings and necklace—estimated around 75 gold total

They divvied up the coin, each walking away richer than before.

Brokk raised his mug. "To a good haul."

Tormli grinned, clinking his tankard against his. "And to gettin' out alive."

Ogar smiled, taking a long drink. "Aye. For now."

Because deep below, in the lost ruins of the mountain…

Their story was just beginning.

The day started as any other—pickaxe in hand, sweat on his brow, stone dust in his beard. Ogar toiled away, chipping at the unyielding rock, the familiar rhythm of mining echoing in his bones.

It had been a good few days since they returned from the Duergar city, and for the most part, life had settled back into its normal, grinding pace.

But that peace did not last long.

As Ogar swung his pickaxe, a sharp voice cut through the tunnel.

"Ogar of the mines. You will come with us."

Ogar turned, scowling as he saw a squad of city guards approaching. Their steel-plated boots clanked against the stone, their helmets dull under the lantern light.

At the front, a stocky, iron-jawed guard captain sneered.

"We know where ye went," he growled. "The sealed tunnels. Ye think the council wouldn't hear? Ye think ye could sneak past the law?"

Ogar wiped the sweat from his brow, keeping his expression neutral.

"Ain't got a damn clue what ye mean," he said, leaning on his pickaxe.

The captain chuckled darkly. "Oh, aye? Well, let's see if ye remember anythin' after a week in the dungeon."

Before Ogar could react, the guards lunged.

Ogar swung, aiming to knock one aside—but they were too many.

A pair tackled him from behind, his arms wrenched backward, cold iron shackles snapping shut around his wrists.

"Damn ye, get yer hands off me!" Ogar snarled, struggling as they dragged him away.

The guards didn't answer.

They just hauled him through the tunnels, past the rows of working dwarves, until the light of the mines faded into darkness.

The moment the cell door clanged shut, Ogar spat onto the floor, shaking his iron-bound wrists.

"Bastards." Then— Laughter.

Ogar turned his head to see Tormli and Brokk, already locked in the same dungeon cell.

Brokk smiled. "Well, took ye long enough."

Tormli leaned back against the damp stone wall, arms crossed. "We tried to talk our way out of it. Didn't work."

Ogar let out a low growl, rolling his shoulders. "How long?"

Tormli sighed. "Week." Ogar muttered a curse, kicking the dirt floor. "Damn it. Wasted time." Then— A soft giggle. Ogar turned his head toward the next cell.

There, grinning through the bars, was the halfling thief—the same one they'd captured weeks ago.

His small hands clutched the rusted iron bars, his beady eyes gleaming.

"Well, well," the halfling mused, rocking back on his heels. "The mighty dwarves join me in the dirt. How the tables turn."

Ogar scowled. "Shut it, rat."

The halfling smiled. "Oh, come now. You should be thanking me. You caught me, and now you share my fate. Isn't that poetic?"

Brokk grunted. "Aye. Poetic as piss in an ale mug."

The halfling chuckled. "Just sayin'— prison changes people. Who knows? We might become friends."

Ogar ignored him.

Instead, he turned back to Tormli and Brokk.

"We ever go back down there again," Ogar muttered, keeping his voice low, "we do it right. No one can know. No one can talk."

Tormli frowned. "Ye still want to? After this?"

Ogar leaned forward. "Think about it. There's gold down there. Not just iron. Not just silver. Real gold."

Brokk grunted. "Aye. And Duergar, and goblins, and worse."

Ogar clenched his fists. "Ain't just about gold. That mine belongs to us. Not the damned grayskins, not the lizards, not the ghosts of the past. Us."

Tormli sighed, running a hand over his beard. "Aye. But if we go back, it has to be in the utmost secret. No slips, no mistakes."

Brokk nodded. "No gettin' caught."

The three dwarves sat in silence for a while, their thoughts settling.

They had found something below—something worth risking everything for.

And this time, they wouldn't be fools about it.

The days dragged.

The dungeon was filthy, the walls damp, the air thick with mold and piss.

The food—if it could be called that—was a miserable slop, barely fit for animals.

The guards mocked them daily, sneering at the "great adventurers who thought they were above the law."

The halfling thief never shut up.

At night, the cold bit at their bones, and sleep came in restless fits.

But they endured.

Dwarves were built for suffering.

And when the seventh day came, the cell door finally swung open.

"Yer time’s up," the jailer grunted. "Now get the hell out before I throw ye back in."

Ogar stepped out of the dungeon, the familiar scent of the mountain air hitting him like a long-lost memory.

Tormli stretched. "Gods, I missed proper air."

Brokk rolled his shoulders, smiling. "Missed proper ale, more like."

Ogar grinned. "Tavern?"

"Aye," they said in unison.

With that, the three dwarves walked toward The Golden Beard, their minds already on the next drink.

But somewhere, in the back of Ogar’s mind, the deep tunnels called to him.

There was more down there. More to find. More to take.

And next time—they wouldn’t get caught.

The Golden Beard was full of its usual laughter, the clinking of tankards, and the rich scent of meat and ale—but for Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk, the taste of freedom was bitter.

They had spent a week rotting in the dungeons, and now, as much as they wanted to drink themselves stupid, they knew the morning would come all too soon.

And with it—their punishment.

The next day, the trio dragged themselves back to the mines, shoulders stiff, heads pounding from ale and exhaustion.

As soon as they arrived, the overseer was waiting.

His bushy eyebrows were furrowed in fury, and his thick arms were crossed over his chest.

"Ye idiots," he snapped. "Ye think ye can piss off the council and just waltz back in like nothin' happened?"

Ogar sighed. "We're here, ain't we? We got work to do."

The overseer snorted. "Aye. And ye ain't gettin' any good work today. No—ye get the shite job."

Tormli groaned. "Oh, what now?" The overseer smiled. "There's a nest of tunnel rats in the lesser shafts. They been gnawin' through supply crates, food stores, and even a few boots. The bastards need clearin' out."

Brokk frowned. "Rats? That's all?" The overseer grinned wickedly.

"Not just any rats. Deep tunnel biters. Mean little bastards with glowin' eyes, razors for teeth, and a love for dwarf flesh. And yer doin' it with these."

He tossed them their weapons. Ogar caught his—a dented wooden shield and a broom.

Tormli's face darkened. "Yer givin' us brooms?"

The overseer chuckled. "That's what ye get for sneakin' into places ye shouldn't. Now get to it."

Ogar gritted his teeth, tightening his grip on the broomstick.

"Fine. But when we get back, we're gonna shove these up yer arse."

The overseer just laughed.

Armed with nothing but broken shields and broomsticks, the trio descended into the lesser tunnels—a part of the mine rarely used, where dust clung to the air and silence pressed down on them.

The deeper they went, the more the gnaw marks became visible—wooden crates half-eaten, sacks of grain ripped open, the smell of rot thick in the air.

Then— A chittering sound. Brokk stopped. "That ain't normal rats." Ogar lifted his torch, casting flickering light into the tunnel ahead.

Then—movement. Tiny glowing eyes stared at them from the darkness. Then more. And more. A dozen pairs of hungry, burning eyes. Then, the swarm came. Screeching, clawing, biting.

Ogar barely had time to swing the broomstick, smashing one rat mid-air before another latched onto his boot.

Tormli cursed, battering them away with his shield, but they kept coming.

Brokk let out a roar, swinging wildly, sending rats flying, but they were everywhere—crawling over their boots, sinking fangs into leather and flesh. A rat jumped in his face and bit him full force, ripping violently. Brokk grabbed the rat and flew it into a wall, a small piece of his face loose.

"By the gods, there's too many!" Tormli shouted.

Ogar gritted his teeth, smashing one rat with his leg .

"We need to find the nest! Kill the source!"

Following the trail of gnawed crates and rat droppings, the trio found a narrow crawlspace, barely large enough to squeeze through.

Ogar grimaced. "Bloody hells. We gotta go in there?" Tormli groaned. "Aye. Unless ye got a better idea?" Brokk didn't wait. He dropped to his stomach, crawling forward through the tight space, rats scurrying past his hands.

The tunnel was unstable, loose rocks shifting above them, dirt raining down as they wriggled through the narrow passage.

Ogar was halfway in when he heard it. A deep, cracking sound. "Move! Now!" The tunnel collapsed.

The three dwarves scrambled forward, dirt and stone crashing down behind them, barely making it out before the passage caved in completely.

Ogar coughed, spitting out dust. "That was too damn close."

Tormli shook his head, panting. "Aye. If we go out like that, I'd never hear the end of it."

Brokk smiled. "Ye ain't dead yet." Then—they saw it.

The rat nest was a cavern of filth, a chamber lined with bones and shredded cloth, the stench of decay heavy in the air. But at its center was something far worse. A stone idol.

Not large—no bigger than a dwarf's torso—but twisted and terrible.

A grotesque figure, carved from black stone, its face a twisted mockery of flesh, its many eyes hollow, its mouth frozen in a silent, gaping scream.

The rats had gnawed at it, their teeth marks covering its surface, as if they had worshiped it—or tried to consume it.

Ogar felt a cold shudder pass through him.

"That ain’t right," Tormli muttered, rubbing his arms. "That ain’t right at all."

Brokk stepped closer, his expression dark. "That’s no dwarven god."

Ogar scowled. "No. It’s worse." They didn’t touch the idol.

They burned the rat nest, drove the remaining vermin into the flames, and watched as the filth turned to ash.

Then, they left the twisted idol where it sat, undisturbed—for now.

When they staggered back to the main tunnels, covered in dirt, scratches, and rat bites, the overseer was waiting.

He smiled. "So. Rats are dead?"

Ogar spat. "Aye. But there’s somethin’ else down there. A statue."

The overseer raised a brow. "Statue?"

Tormli crossed his arms. "Not just any statue. Something unnatural."

Brokk’s voice was grim. "Something that shouldn’t be down there."

The overseer chuckled. "Bah. Rats probably pissed on some old rock. Nothin’ more."

Ogar wasn’t so sure. As the dwarves left, the memory of the twisted idol lingered in his mind. The weeks passed in the slow, grinding rhythm of the mines.

Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk returned to the life of labor, swinging their pickaxes at stone, hauling iron ore and silver, sweating in the lantern-lit tunnels where time seemed to stretch endlessly. It was hard work. Grueling work.

But in the evenings, after the dirt was washed off and the day's wages were collected, they found respite in the only way dwarves knew how—

With ale, music, and reckless drinking.

The Golden Beard welcomed them nightly, its air thick with smoke, laughter, and the deep hum of old dwarven songs.

Ogar and his comrades drank heavily, their tankards never empty, their table always surrounded by loud voices and slamming fists.

Brokk arm-wrestled any fool who dared challenge him.

Tormli gambled away his silver in dice games, swearing loudly every time he lost.

Ogar? Ogar found himself spending his nights with Leda. At first, it was just company—talking, laughing, sharing drinks after a long day. But slowly, something deeper formed.

Leda started staying over more often. She would wake before him, tidying his mess, cursing under her breath about the filth.

One evening, as they sat by his modest hearth, he pulled a necklace from his pouch—one of the trinkets they had found in the old tunnels.

Leda raised an eyebrow as he handed it to her. "Thought it might suit ye." Ogar muttered, rubbing the back of his neck.

She studied it for a long moment. Then, with a small smile, she clasped it around her neck. "Aye," she said. "I think it does."

And after that, she never left.

Leda took it upon herself to fix up Ogar's house. She carved sturdy chairs and a proper table, polished the old stone hearth, replaced the thin, ragged bedding with a thick fur-lined blanket. She cleaned relentlessly, cursing the whole time. "Ye live like a damned cave rat," she scolded, sweeping dust from the corners.

Ogar just grumbled, watching her work with a bemused smile. By the end of the month, his house was no longer a hole in the ground—it was a home. And he liked it.

Despite the comforts of home, the deep tunnels still called to them. Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk began to plan their next venture carefully. They had a couple of free days from work coming.

They needed to be smarter this time. They couldn't just march in armed to the teeth, not with the city guards watching them. Instead, they hid their gear near the entrance to the sealed tunnels, tucked behind loose stone where no one would think to look. Their helmets, weapons, warm clothing, and packs of supplies were all stashed away, ready for when they slipped away unseen.

Before they could leave, Ogar made a stop at Mara's shop. The herbalist sighed when she saw him.

"Back for more healing potions, are ye?" she muttered, already rummaging through her shelves of herbs and vials.

Ogar smiled. "Aye. Gonna be a long trip."

She handed him three small vials, their liquid a deep emerald green.

"These'll keep ye alive, but don't be expectin' miracles," she warned.

Ogar nodded, tucking them into his belt pouch. "Thanks, Mara. Ye ever need somethin' from below, ye let me know."

She rolled her eyes. "Just try not to die down there."

That night, as Ogar sat by the hearth, checking his gear, Leda entered the room, holding something folded in her arms.

She tossed it onto the table.

"Here. Made ye somethin'."

Ogar unfolded the thick, well-stitched cloak, made of dark wool, lined with fur for warmth.

"For when ye go runnin' off into the deep," she muttered, crossing her arms.

Ogar raised an eyebrow. "Ye know?"

She scoffed. "Course I know. Ye think I ain't noticed ye sneakin' about, talkin' in whispers with those two fools?"

Ogar grinned. "Ye gonna tell the guards on me?"

Leda smiled, shaking her head. "Nah. But ye better come back in one piece, ye stubborn bastard."

Ogar chuckled, draping the cloak over his shoulders. "Aye. I'll do my best."

At the tavern, as they nursed their ales, Brokk pulled a book from his pack.

One of the old tomes they had taken from the abandoned dwarven library.

"Been readin' through these," he muttered, flipping the yellowed pages.

Tormli leaned in. "And?"

Brokk ran his finger along an old map.

"Ain't just the Duergar city down there," he said. "The tunnels go deeper. Way deeper than we thought."

Ogar frowned. "How deep?"

Brokk tapped the map. "Deep enough that the Duergar themselves never touched some parts. And ye know what that means."

Tormli smiled. "Unclaimed riches."

Ogar nodded. "Aye. And secrets no one's seen in centuries."

They clinked their tankards together, the fire of adventure burning in their bellies once again.

The gear was hidden. The maps were studied. Their warm clothing was prepared. And soon, when the time was right, they would descend into the depths once more. But this time, they would go far beyond the Duergar ruins. This time, they would go into the forgotten dark. Where no dwarf had walked before.

Back Into Deep

The time had come.

The Golden Beard was still alive with song and drunken brawls when Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk slipped away into the tunnels, careful to avoid watchful eyes.

Their gear was hidden, waiting near the entrance to the sealed-off mines.

The moment they reached their secret cache, they donned their armor, strapped on their weapons, and adjusted their packs.

Ogar pulled the fur-lined cloak Leda had made him tighter around his shoulders, feeling the warmth of its fabric.

Tormli checked the maps, while Brokk muttered, "Ain’t no goin’ back now."

Ogar smiled. "Aye. Let’s move."

And so, beneath the cover of darkness, they stepped once more into the forbidden tunnels of the deep.

They traveled for hours, their footsteps echoing in the deep tunnels, the air growing colder, the stone walls shifting from dwarven craftsmanship to raw, untouched earth.

The deeper they went, the more the silence pressed against them, broken only by the occasional distant drip of water, the scuttling of unseen creatures, and the faint rush of underground rivers.

Then—familiar light ahead.

Ogar narrowed his eyes. "Ouza’s place."

They stepped into the bone chamber, where the lizard-man still sat in his makeshift throne, but this time—

He was not alone.

Several more lizardfolk lounged nearby, some mending spears, others roasting some unknown meat over a small fire.

Their yellow, reptilian eyes flickered toward the newcomers.

One hissed, but Ouza simply raised a clawed hand, silencing them.

"You return," he mused, his long tail flicking lazily.

Ogar smiled, lowering his pack onto the ground. "Aye. We figured we’d stop for a bite."

Ouza’s sharp teeth glinted in the firelight. "Then sit. Eat. Drink."

They settled down, accepting bowls of thick, steaming soup, filled with mystery meat and fungi.

As they ate, Tormli glanced around. "Ye got more company this time."

Ouza nodded. "More of my kind have gathered. We are… few, compared to your dwarven clans, but we survive."

Brokk leaned forward, wiping his mouth. "And ye don’t go near the gray dwarves?"

Ouza’s slitted pupils narrowed. "We do not. The Duergar are… cruel, greedy things. They hate that which they cannot control. Their city is not ours."

Ogar smiled. "Sounds like dwarves in general."

Ouza let out a low, hissing chuckle.

"Perhaps," he mused. "But you are different."

They finished their meal, filled their waterskins, and thanked Ouza for the hospitality.

Then, with new strength in their limbs, they pressed on—toward the deeper tunnels.

The map they carried—one of the old tomes Brokk had studied—showed a hidden passage.

A way past the Duergar city without having to fight their way through.

They followed the narrow tunnels, careful to stay quiet, moving past the areas where the gray dwarves patrolled.

The path was tight in some places, forcing them to crawl, to shimmy through cracks, but after half a day of steady travel, they emerged into a new section of the underworld.

A long, straight tunnel, stretching further than their torches could illuminate.

"This is it," Brokk muttered, tapping the map.

Ogar nodded. "Let’s set up camp here. Rest before we push deeper."

They made a small fire, the flames casting long shadows against the rough stone walls.

They unpacked their food, sharing dried meat, bread, and some of Ouza’s soup.

Brokk smoked his pipe, leaning against his pack. "Ye ever wonder what’s further down? Past what the gray dwarves even know?"

Tormli exhaled, watching the smoke drift upward. "Aye. But there’s always somethin’ worse in the dark."

Ogar took a swig from his flask. "And somethin’ richer, too. Ain’t no gold in the safe tunnels."

They sat in silence for a while, the fire crackling, the weight of the mountain pressing down on them.

The three dwarves sat by the campfire, staring into the dancing flames, their minds heavy with thoughts of the deep unknown.

The warmth of the fire flickered against the stone walls, casting long, shifting shadows across the ancient tunnel.

Brokk exhaled smoke from his pipe, tapping the ash against the rock.

"Time to move," Ogar muttered, standing and tightening his belt.

Tormli groaned, stretching his arms. "Aye. Before we get too comfortable."

They packed their gear, stomped out the fire, and marched into the dark once more.

The tunnel stretched long and empty ahead of them, its walls rough, untouched by dwarven craftsmanship.

Then—something on the ground. A few pickaxes, lying abandoned near the tunnel floor.

Tormli picked one up, turning it over in his hands. The wood was aged but sturdy, the iron worn from use.

"Duergar, maybe?" he muttered. "Looks like they been diggin’ here."

Ogar nodded, grabbing a pickaxe for himself and securing it onto his back. "Might come in handy."

They left the rest behind and moved on. The tunnel twisted right. They followed it.

Then a left turn led them deeper. The air grew colder.

A steep descent forced them to watch their footing, the loose rock shifting under their boots.

Finally, another right turn—and they stopped. Before them lay a collapsed passage.

A mass of stone and debris blocked the way forward, but beyond it, they could see just enough space to know the tunnel continued on the other side.

Tormli sighed. "Well… shit." Brokk rubbed his chin. "We dig?" Ogar shrugged the pickaxe off his back. "Aye. We dig."

They took turns, swinging the pickaxe, breaking apart the fallen rock, hauling chunks of debris away by hand.

The echo of metal against stone rang through the tunnel, the rhythmic thud-thud-thud filling the air.

Sweat glistened on their brows despite the cold. After half an hour, they broke through. A small opening formed, just large enough to crawl through. Ogar wiped his brow, grinning. "That wasn't so bad."

Then—a sound. A clicking noise. Then another. A strange, skittering movement. And suddenly—they were not alone. Emerging from the dark crevices of the tunnel, twisted figures crawled into the torchlight.

Half elf, half spider—grotesque mutations of something that had once been mortal.

Their upper bodies remained elven, their faces hollow-eyed and gaunt, but their lower halves had fused with monstrous arachnid limbs, their pale skin glistening like chitin, their mouths filled with jagged fangs.

They moved unnaturally, their limbs clicking against the rock.

One of them hissed, its voice still holding a whisper of elven grace. "Intruderssss…"

Then they attacked. One leaped from the ceiling, its claws flashing, aiming straight for Ogar. He barely had time to raise his sword, catching the creature's blow on his blade, forcing it backward. Brokk swung his axe low, shearing off one of the thing's spider legs, sending it screeching to the ground.

Tormli ducked beneath a lashing limb, driving his hatchet into the side of another, splitting its ribcage open. The creatures did not fall easily.

Even wounded, they lunged, their fangs snapping, their limbs swinging. One of them wrapped its clawed fingers around Brokk's throat, forcing him against the wall. Ogar turned and, with a mighty swing, cleaved through its arm at the elbow, sending black ichor spraying across the tunnel. The spider-elf howled, reeling backward.

Another one pounced at Tormli, its fangs aimed for his neck—but he rolled aside and buried a hatchet into its chest, twisting deep.

The battle was fast and bloody. At last, with a final snarl, the last of the spider-elves collapsed, twitching on the ground. The tunnel fell into silence. Ogar kicked over a corpse, grimacing at the unnatural fusion of elf and beast.

Tormli wiped his blade on his sleeve. "What in the nine hells were those things?"

Brokk frowned, catching his breath. "Some kinda curse? Mutation?"

Ogar looked around the tunnel, the dim torchlight casting flickering shadows.

"Whatever they were," he muttered, "They sure as hell weren't friendly."

He lifted his pack, adjusting his cloak. "We move on. Whatever's ahead can't be worse than this." Tormli snorted. "Ye always say that. And ye're always wrong." Brokk grinned. "Aye. But let's find out just how wrong he is." With that, they stepped past the corpses, venturing deeper into the tunnels of the unknown.

The deeper they went, the more the tunnels turned against them. At first, it was just a winding path—a few left turns, a few rights. Then, the corridors became twisting things, looping in directions that made no sense. The dwarves found themselves doubling back, returning to places they had just left behind. Tormli gritted his teeth, turning his map over and over in his hands. "This ain't right."

Ogar scowled. "I know that, ye fool." Brokk grunted, pointing ahead. "We go right here, then left, then straight." They did. And somehow, they arrived back at the same damned spot. Ogar clenched his fists. "How in the deep hells are we back here?" Brokk threw up his hands. "I don't bloody know!"

Tormli muttered curses under his breath. "This tunnel's cursed." They turned back, taking a different route. Then another. Then another. But the maze refused to let them through. After what felt like hours, they reached a dead end. But something was off.

The rock ahead looked looser, not quite as old as the natural stone. Ogar swung the pickaxe off his back. "We ain't gettin' through the way we came. Might as well make our own path." With heavy swings, they tore into the stone, breaking apart loose rock, clearing a new passage. The work was brutal—sweat dripped, arms burned, dust coated their beards. But after a time, the rock gave way, revealing a wide cave beyond. And inside— They found the statues.

The cavern was vast, its ceiling lost in darkness, its floor scattered with mushrooms and cracked stone tiles. Four massive stone pillars lined the sides of the chamber, each one adorned with a weathered, sitting figure.

Carved from black rock, their wings curled around their hunched forms, their expressions frozen in grim silence.

In the center of the cave, between the pillars, lay several old chests, their wood rotting, their iron hinges rusted.

Brokk leaned against one of the statues, wiping his brow.

"So where the hell ye think this leads?" he asked, catching his breath.

Ogar shrugged. "Dunno, but if there's chests, maybe there's—"

Then, a sound. A deep, grating scrape of stone. Brokk froze. Then—a growl. And the statue he had leaned against moved.

With a horrible screech, the four stone figures uncurled from their perches, their eyes glowing with an eerie blue light. Their clawed hands flexed, their stone wings cracked and stretched, and they lunged.

Ogar barely had time to raise his sword before one of them swiped at him, its massive talons screeching against his armor, sending him staggering. Tormli rolled aside as another slammed into the ground where he had just stood, sending stone shards flying. Brokk roared, swinging his axe straight into the chest of the closest one—but his blade barely cut through the stone hide.

"They’re too damned tough!" Tormli shouted, blocking a heavy blow with his shield.

Ogar gritted his teeth, ducking another swipe. "Then we break 'em apart piece by piece!"

One gargoyle lunged for Brokk, its massive wings flapping, sending a gust of air through the cave.

Brokk ducked under its strike, rolling forward, then swung his axe hard at its legs. CRACK. The stone splintered, and the creature let out a horrid screech, stumbling to one knee. Ogar saw his chance. With a mighty swing, he brought his sword down on the gargoyle’s neck, severing its head from its shoulders. The creature crumbled into lifeless rubble.

Tormli was locked in a brutal struggle with another, its stone claws crushing down on his shield. With a snarl, he rammed his hatchet into its wing, splintering it, then smashed the blunt end of his weapon into its skull. The gargoyle staggered, dazed— Long enough for Brokk to bring his axe down, splitting its head in two.

The last two took flight, circling the cavern, then dove down at once. Ogar and Tormli dodged aside, but Brokk took a glancing hit, his shoulder cracking against the stone.

Snarling, he threw his axe at one of the creatures mid-air. The weapon spun, slamming into the gargoyle’s wing joint, sending it crashing down. Ogar was on it in an instant, stomping its head into dust.

The final gargoyle let out a shriek, trying to escape, but Tormli grabbed a heavy rock from the cave floor and hurled it straight into its chest. The impact sent it careening into a stone pillar, and as it tried to rise— Brokk and Ogar rushed it together, their weapons falling like a hammer onto an anvil, breaking the creature into lifeless shards.

The cave fell silent, the only sound their heavy breathing. Ogar rolled his shoulders, wincing. "Bastards hit like a damned forge hammer."

Tormli kicked a chunk of broken gargoyle. "Aye, but they ain’t gettin’ up again." Brokk retrieved his axe, shaking his head. "I hate statues." Ogar smiled, brushing dust from his cloak. "Let’s keep movin’ before anythin’ else in here decides to wake up."

They stepped past the shattered remains, venturing deeper into the tunnels beyond the cave.

The walls were lined with fungi, some glowing faintly, others dripping with strange sap.

Massive spiderwebs stretched across the ceilings, their silken threads catching the light of their torches.

Water dripped from above, the air damp, cool, and thick with the scent of earth and decay.

Then, ahead— A wide underground spring. The water was dark, but clear, the cavern stretching out into unknown depths beyond.

Ogar stepped forward, staring at the rippling surface. "Looks like this is where we're goin' next." Tormli sighed. "Of course it is." Brokk smiled, adjusting his belt. "Ye scared of a little swim?" Ogar grinned. "Aye. Ye first." And with that, they prepared to cross the underground waters, deeper into the unknown.

The cave air hung thick with dampness, the scent of earth and ancient stone filling the space. Water dripped from stalactites above, the only sound echoing in the darkness.

Ogar stepped closer to the underground spring, peering into its dark depths.

Something glittered beneath the surface.

He knelt, lowering his hand into the icy water, feeling the cold bite into his skin.

"See somethin'?" Tormli muttered, watching.

"Aye," Ogar grunted.

Without another word, he took a deep breath and dived beneath the surface.

The world turned silent and cold as Ogar descended into the spring, his torchlight fading above.

The water was clearer than expected, the stone walls slick with age, their surfaces worn smooth by centuries of underground currents.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness, scanning the rocky bed below.

And there, nestled between two jagged stones—three gold nuggets, gleaming in the dim light.

Ogar reached out, brushing away silt and debris, prying them loose.

As he surfaced, he spat out water, holding up his prize.

"Gold."

Tormli grinned. "We're off to a damn fine start."

Brokk chuckled, clapping Ogar on the back. "If ye're done pissin' about, let's get movin'."

The three dwarves secured their gear, took one last breath, and waded into the water, letting the current guide them deeper into the rock.

The current was slow, but steady, pulling them forward through a narrow tunnel, just wide enough to swim through.

They moved carefully, keeping their heads above water, the cave ceiling providing air pockets to breathe. But soon, the tunnel descended further. The ceiling disappeared. They had no choice but to dive.

Beneath the water, the darkness thickened, but their eyes caught the faint outline of something unnatural—

Broken pillars, shattered ruins buried beneath centuries of water.

Ogar kicked forward, gesturing for the others to follow.

The ruins were ancient, their carvings worn beyond recognition, yet something about them suggested this path led somewhere important.

They surfaced again, gasping for breath, before diving once more, moving through the submerged tunnels.

After what felt like an eternity, the water shallows, and they emerge into another cavern.

The dwarves dragged themselves onto dry stone, shaking off the cold water.

Ogar was about to press forward—until he saw it.

A small gold vein, running along the wall, its faint glimmer barely visible in the torchlight.

Brokk grinned. "Well, now. That’s a pretty sight."

Without hesitation, they pulled out their pickaxes and got to work.

The stone resisted, but after a few hard strikes, flakes of gold fell into their hands.

It wasn’t much—but it was gold nonetheless.

Tormli wiped sweat from his brow. "Ain’t much, but better than nothin’."

Ogar secured the gold into his pouch. "Aye. Now let’s see what’s waitin’ for us ahead."

The next tunnel led to something far worse. They stepped into a massive cave chamber, the air thick with the scent of rot and dust. And the floor— Littered with bones.

Hundreds of skulls, shattered ribcages, broken femurs—the remains of goblins, beasts, and even dwarves.

Brokk stepped forward cautiously—then his boot caught on a loose rock.

With a loud curse, he tripped forward, crashing to the ground.

His axe, belt, and gear clattered, metal against stone—the sound echoing through the chamber.

Ogar and Tormli froze. Then—shuffling. The distant patter of feet. A snarling voice.

"Dwarves… in our lair."

From the shadows, goblins poured in.

Ten goblins rushed into the chamber, their yellowed eyes gleaming, their crude weapons raised.

Ogar barely had time to draw his sword before the first goblin lunged.

He parried hard, sending the creature sprawling, before turning into a wild brawl.

Tormli ducked under a spear thrust, cleaving his hatchet into the goblin's chest, yanking it free with a wet crunch.

Brokk swung his axe in wide arcs, taking down two at once, their bodies crumpling into the bone-strewn ground.

A goblin climbed onto Ogar's back, biting into his shoulder.

"Get off me, ye little shit!"

He grabbed the creature, slammed it into the cave wall, and drove his blade through its gut.

The fight was messy, brutal, and fast. One by one, the goblins fell, their screams fading into the darkness. Until a new sound filled the cavern. A deep, guttural laugh. Ogar turned—and his blood ran cold.

A massive figure entered the chamber, standing nearly as tall as an orc, wrapped in crude iron and bone armor. The Goblin King.

His warped face twisted into a sneer, his jagged crown made of stolen gold and bone.

In his hands—a massive cleaver, blackened from years of blood. "Dwarves come to die." Without warning, he charged. Ogar barely had time to raise his sword, meeting the impact head-on. The force sent him sliding back, his boots skidding over loose bones.

Tormli and Brokk flanked from the sides, but the Goblin King was fast—too fast for something his size. He swung his cleaver at Brokk, the dwarf barely ducking in time, feeling the air whistling above his head.

Tormli rushed in, hatchet flashing, but the king caught the blow on his iron bracer, shoving him back.

Ogar growled, stepping forward and swinging his blade at the king's side. The Goblin King twisted, the blade grazing his armor instead of sinking deep. Then the king slammed his cleaver down, catching Ogar across the chest. Ogar felt his breath leave him, the force sending him staggering.

Brokk roared, using the opening to slam his axe into the Goblin King’s knee. The monster howled, stumbling. Tormli was already there, burying his hatchet deep into the king’s exposed ribs.

Ogar, still gasping for breath, gritted his teeth and thrust his sword straight through the Goblin King’s throat.

A deep gurgling sound filled the chamber. The king twitched, his massive hands dropping his weapon—

Then collapsed. Dead. Silence filled the bone chamber. The dwarves panted, bloody and bruised, but victorious. Ogar wiped his blade clean, spitting onto the ground. "That was a right bastard." Brokk grinned, adjusting his gear. "Aye. But the king’s dead now."

The tunnel stretched before them, winding deeper into the goblins’ territory.

The air grew thick with the stench of filth, damp rot, and burnt meat, the acrid smell curling in their noses.

Flickering torchlight barely held back the oppressive darkness, casting twisting shadows along the rough-hewn walls.

Ogar gritted his teeth. "This place reeks." Tormli snorted. "Aye. Smells like a goblin’s arse." Brokk grinned. "Ye ever smelled a goblin’s arse?"

Tormli frowned. "…Shut up." The path ahead forked, tunnels twisting in multiple directions, but one thing was clear—

They had stumbled into a true goblin lair. As they stepped forward, the tunnel opened up into a vast chamber, the heart of the goblin settlement.

Shoddy wooden walkways bridged over deep, debris-filled pits, while makeshift support beams leaned dangerously, barely keeping the structure from collapsing on itself.

The walls were covered in crude scribbles—perhaps maps, perhaps madness, drawn in charcoal and filth. Ogar’s eyes scanned the room.

Scattered throughout the den, the goblins had collected junk piles—their idea of treasures. Bent and rusted weapons, stolen from who-knows-where. Bits of armor too big or too small, useless for dwarves but hoarded anyway. A pile of shiny stones and broken glass, reflecting the torchlight like treasure.

Brokk chuckled, nudging a pile of twisted daggers with his boot. "Goblins, dumb little shits, can’t even keep proper weapons."

Tormli eyed a rusted breastplate. "Look at this. Doesn’t even fit one o’ their kind." Ogar exhaled sharply. "Don’t get comfortable. We ain’t here to admire goblin filth." He pointed toward a darker alcove, the stench of decay thickening.

Stepping into the shaman’s den, the dwarves felt the air shift.

The walls narrowed, forming a tight chamber, lit by small, flickering candles.

The ground was littered with bizarre bone charms, dried lizard tails, and bizarre fetishes, goblin magic at its most twisted. Ogar's eyes narrowed as he took it all in.

A rude stone altar stood at the back of the room—one that was not goblin-made. No, this had once been dwarven. Stolen. Defiled.

Goblins had scratched crude carvings into its surface, scrawling their nonsense symbols over old dwarven runes.

And at the altar's center, looming over the flickering candles— A demonic statue. Ogar's stomach turned. It was the same figure they had seen in the rat's nest above. Only this one was much, much bigger. Tormli exhaled slowly. "I don't like this."

Brokk ran a hand over the rough stone, his jaw tightening. "This was one of ours. Some temple piece. They stole it. Corrupted it." Ogar clenched his fists. "And this thing…"

He gestured to the hulking demonic statue, its hollow eyes staring down at them.

"I don't know what it is. But it's been showin' up too much for my liking."

Tormli grunted. "What do we do?" Ogar reached into his belt and pulled out his flask. He took one long swig—then splashed the rest onto the altar. "Burn it," he growled. Brokk grinned, striking a flint against his axe. The flames caught instantly.

The altar burned, and the demonic statue cracked in the heat, sending twisting shadows against the cave walls.

The goblins in the main den stirred. The air hummed—a deep, unnatural rumbling in the earth. Then came the screams. The goblins had noticed. And they were coming.

The dwarves barely had time to brace themselves before the goblins swarmed into the room. They came in waves, screeching in rage, climbing over each other in a rabid frenzy.

Ogar swung first, his blade cleaving through the first goblin's skull, sending a spray of dark blood against the burning altar. Tormli met the charge with a wide-arching axe swing, sending three goblins sprawling, their bodies rolling into the fire. Brokk, laughing like a madman, caught one goblin by the throat, lifting it off its feet, then slamming it headfirst into the stone.

The battle was a chaotic, brutal mess. Blades clashed. Bones broke. Screams of pain mixed with wild goblin shrieks. Then the Goblin Shaman stepped forward. Draped in filthy furs, his face twisted in an eerie, toothy grin, he raised his twisted staff, muttering something in an ancient tongue.

A dark wind rushed through the cave. Shadows slithered along the ground. Ogar felt his stomach twist—something was wrong. And then— The Goblin King entered.

He was even bigger than before.

The crown of bone and gold still sat atop his massive skull, his cleaver still stained with the blood of those he'd slain before.

But now—his eyes glowed a deep, unnatural red. A shaman's curse. He had been raised again. Ogar swallowed hard. "Oh, ye gotta be shittin' me."

Tormli's grip tightened around his hatchet. "I hate magic." Brokk snarled. "Then let's kill him twice."

The Goblin King roared, and the battle erupted once more. Ogar met the Goblin King's charge head-on, his sword meeting the massive cleaver in a clash of sparks. The impact sent Ogar sliding back, boots skidding across the stone. Tormli rushed in from the side, hacking at the king's legs, forcing him to stumble.

Brokk, seeing the opening, lunged, his axe biting deep into the king's side. The Goblin King howled, but he was far from done. He swung his cleaver wildly, catching Tormli in the ribs, sending him crashing into a pile of bones.

Ogar drove forward, stabbing his sword deep into the king's chest, twisting the blade. The king snarled, spitting blood, but still fighting. Brokk grabbed a torch from the burning altar— And shoved it straight into the king's cursed, glowing eyes.

The Goblin King shrieked, stumbling back— Then Ogar and Tormli, together, drove their weapons straight through his neck. With a final, gurgling death rattle, the Goblin King fell. For the second, and final, time. Ogar crushed the shamans skull in one swift move.

Ogar stood over the goblin shaman's twitching body, his sword dripping with dark blood, its once-glowing staff now a shattered stick on the floor. The battle was over.

The air still buzzed with tension, the lingering stench of magic and death thick in the chamber. Brokk wiped his axe on a fallen goblin's tunic and let out a heavy exhale. "Bastard put up a fight."

Tormli scowled, rubbing his ribs where the king had struck him. "Aye. I don't trust anythin' that mutters in a language I don't understand." Ogar kicked the shaman's corpse, just to be sure. No movement. "Good," he grunted. "Now let's see what these goblins have been hidin'."

The tunnel ahead twisted before opening into another chamber, the air thick with the scent of rot and filth.

They had found the goblin's "treasure hoard"—a massive pit dug into the floor, filled with mounds of stolen junk.

Ogar squinted at the pile. "That's a whole lotta shite." Brokk snorted. "Typical goblin hoardin'. Everything looks valuable till ye actually pick it up."

They searched through the trash, finding empty ale kegs, gnawed on, repurposed as beds. A rotting crate of spoiled rations, still being eaten by bold goblins before they died. A pile of

coins, but all foreign, worthless underground—yet hoarded as if they were gold. A dwarf's missing boot—with a skeletal foot still inside.

Tormli grimaced, tossing the boot aside. "Remind me never to get caught by goblins."

Brokk picked up one of the useless coins, flipping it between his fingers. "Guess we ain't gettin' rich from this pile." Ogar sighed, dusting off his hands. "Let's see what else these vermin were hidin'."

A side chamber revealed what must have been their version of an armory. It was a sorry sight. Spears made of jagged bones and rusty nails. Rotted wooden shields, painted with crude goblin faces. A stolen dwarven helm, dented and filled with old stew remnants. Tiny cages holding angry rats—possibly pets, possibly future meals.

Ogar picked up one of the "shields" and shook his head. "This is an insult to craftsmanship." Tormli grinned, knocking on a shield. "Barely worth usin' as firewood." Brokk, however, eyed the caged rats. "Now, what in the hells do ye lot eat down here?" he muttered, watching as one of the rodents hissed at him, baring its tiny, yellowed fangs.

Tormli raised an eyebrow. "Ye thinkin' of takin' one home?" Brokk chuckled. "Only if we run outta food." Ogar shook his head. "Keep movin'. Ain't nothin' here but piss-poor weapons and disease."

Further in, they came across the most unsettling part of the goblin lair. A tangled network of tiny tunnels, barely large enough for a dwarf to crawl through. "The little shits must use these to escape," Tormli muttered, his eyes narrowing.

Brokk leaned against the tunnel wall, listening. A distant whisper drifted from the darkness. But it wasn't goblin speech. It was… something else. Ogar's grip tightened on his sword. "Ye hear that?" Brokk murmured. Tormli swallowed. "Aye. And I don't like it."

They also found half-buried in the dirt— A broken dwarven minecart. Its sides were scratched, dented, and covered in old grime. But there was something etched into the metal. A map.

Ogar ran his fingers over the carvings, trying to make sense of it. "Looks like…" he hesitated, squinting at the faded markings. Tormli frowned. "A map? To where?"

Brokk wiped some of the dirt away, but even with a clearer view, the markings made little sense.

Aside from the minecart map, they found a goblin's "lucky" rock—just a rock, but clearly important to some dead goblin. A crude map of the area, but with no useful markings aside from warnings. A pouch of stolen silverware—utterly useless underground. A preserved lizard, wrapped in twine—a goblin charm. Ogar muttered, "Might be one of Ouza's cousins." A tiny wooden idol—possibly sacred, or just a random carved stick. A broken spyglass, which goblins had likely believed was a magical "seeing tube." A collection of mismatched keys, none of which fit anything in the lair.

Tormli rubbed his temples. "We killed a whole goblin clan for this shite?" Brokk kicked at one of the junk piles. "Damned waste of time." Ogar sighed, sitting on a cracked wooden crate. "Maybe not. Ain't just goblins livin' in these tunnels. That whisperin'… it weren't goblin speech."

Tormli and Brokk exchanged glances. They weren't sure what was down there. But they knew they had to find out. Ogar stood, stretching his sore arms. "We ain't makin' sense of these maps. We'll have to trust our gut goin' deeper."

Brokk grabbed his axe, resting it against his shoulder. "Aye. And my gut says whatever's down there… ain't gonna be friendly." Tormli pulled out his flask, took a long swig, and sighed. "Just once, I'd like to go underground without meetin' somethin' that wants to rip me apart."

Ogar smiled. "Then ye shouldn't have been born a dwarf."

With that, they stepped past the trash piles, deeper into the unknown tunnels beyond the goblin lair.

The decision was made.

They had ventured far enough, taken their risks, and their free days were running short. If they didn't return soon, someone would start asking questions.

Ogar, glancing one last time down the deeper tunnels beyond the goblin lair, felt a familiar itch in his bones.

They had barely scratched the surface of what lay deeper underground.

But that was for another time.

"Right," he muttered, hoisting his gear over his shoulder. "Let's get the hells out of here."

Tormli stretched, rolling his sore shoulders. "About time. I'm startin' to stink worse than a goblin's backside."

Brokk chuckled, tightening his belt. "Ye already stunk before we left."

Tormli shot him a glare, but Ogar ignored them both, stepping toward the exit tunnel.

They had a long road back. And no time to waste. Leaving the goblin-infested caverns, they entered the narrow tunnels that led back toward the underground spring.

The path was steep, winding upward, their boots crunching over loose gravel and patches of mossy stone. Faint glowing fungi lined the walls, casting a soft green hue on the tunnel around them. For the first time since they had ventured down, they weren't being hunted.

No goblins lurking in the dark. No Duergar waiting with steel. No cursed beasts creeping behind them. Just the empty silence of the deep, the sound of their own footsteps echoing back at them. It was unnerving.

Tormli muttered under his breath, "Feels wrong. Ain’t had one damned fight since we left the lair."

Brokk snorted. "That’s a good thing, ye fool." Ogar didn’t answer, but he agreed with Tormli. The tunnels were too quiet.

After hours of walking, they arrived at the underground spring, where they had swum through the submerged ruins. The water was still and black, reflecting their torchlight like a mirror.

Ogar grunted, setting his pack down. "No way around it. Gotta swim." Tormli groaned, already pulling off his belt and boots. "Again?" Brokk, tossing his axe onto a dry rock, smiled. "What, ye afraid o’ the water?"

Tormli grumbled something about "dwarves weren’t meant for swimmin’," but they had no choice. One by one, they slipped into the icy depths, gasping as the cold bit into their bones.

The first stretch was easy—they paddled along the open chamber, keeping to the rocky edges of the spring. Then came the real challenge. The submerged tunnel.

Ogar took a deep breath, plunging beneath the surface, his torchlight fading as he entered the underwater ruins. The pillars and crumbling structures still stood, remnants of something ancient. His lungs burned as he kicked forward, navigating through the collapsed stones and narrow passages. Then—air.

He broke the surface, gasping. Tormli surfaced right after, coughing. "I hate this." Brokk came up last, wiping water from his eyes. "Ye didn’t drown, ye baby. Keep movin’."

They continued swimming through the flooded ruins, stopping only when they could cling to rocky ledges, catching their breath before the final submerged stretch.

When they finally emerged onto solid ground, they collapsed onto the cold stone, panting.

Tormli groaned, laying flat on his back. "We ain’t doin’ that again." Ogar smiled. "Ye said that last time." Brokk laughed. "He’ll say it again next time, too."

Tormli just grumbled, squeezing the water from his beard. They put their gear back on, gathered their strength, and moved on.

Further ahead, they reached the sharp vertical climb—a section of their journey where the tunnel had collapsed long ago, forcing them to climb up jagged rock formations. "Ye still got that rope?" Tormli asked, glancing at Ogar.

Ogar pulled it from his pack, tying one end around his belt. "Aye. Let’s get up there."

Brokk went first, his strong arms gripping the uneven stone, hauling himself up the rocky incline. Ogar followed next, wedging his boots into the cracks, testing his footing before pushing upward. Halfway up, the rocks beneath Tormli’s grip crumbled, sending him sliding downward. "Shit!"

Ogar reacted fast, grabbing the rope and yanking it tight, stopping Tormli's fall. "Climb, ye lazy bastard!" Ogar growled. Tormli gritted his teeth, grabbing for another handhold, hauling himself up with Ogar's support.

Eventually, all three dwarves reached the upper ledge, catching their breath. Brokk wiped sweat from his brow. "Next time, let's find a minecart." Tormli huffed. "Next time, let's stay on the damned surface." Ogar just grinned. "Aye. Until we get bored."

They pushed forward. As they neared the old sealed-off sections of the mines, they reached the tightest stretch of tunnel. A low, jagged crevice, barely wide enough for a dwarf to squeeze through.

Ogar went first, crawling through the rocky passage, his armor scraping against the walls. "Ye could've lost some weight before this," Tormli muttered behind him, struggling to wriggle through.

Brokk, coming last, grunted as he pulled himself forward. "Bloody tight fit." Halfway through, Ogar felt something shift. A rock above him loosened, tumbling down. It landed right next to his head, barely missing him. He cursed under his breath. "Move faster! This place ain't stable!"

With some effort, grumbling, and a few scraped knees, they dragged themselves out of the crawlspace, standing at last on the other side.

They were almost home. The last leg of the journey was a familiar path—the old, abandoned tunnels leading back to the mine. They moved quickly, their boots thudding against the stone, their breath misting in the colder air. And then— A gust of fresh air. The first sign of the surface.

They pushed forward, rounding the final bend, stepping into the familiar tunnels of the working mines. Torches lined the walls, and in the distance, the sounds of real dwarven work filled the air. They had made it.

Ogar exhaled, running a hand through his soaked beard. "Home sweet home," Tormli muttered. Brokk cracked his knuckles. "First thing I'm doin'—ale." Ogar smiled. "Aye. Ale, a warm hearth, and no damn goblins."

They had returned. But their minds still lingered on the deep tunnels they had left behind.

Because one thing was certain— They would go back.

Small Dealings

The Golden Beard tavern was alive with laughter and song, its halls packed with dwarves after a long day's work.

The rich scent of roasted meat and ale filled the air, tankards slammed against wooden tables, and the hum of dwarven songs carried through the room.

At a corner table, Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk sat deep in their drinks, their bodies still sore from the journey underground.

Ogar leaned back, taking a deep swig of Darkbane, the harsh liquor burning down his throat.

Across from him, Leda sat with her own tankard, eyes sharp with interest.

"So," she said, tilting her head. "Ye really think there's gold down there?"

Ogar smiled, setting his tankard down. "**Aye. Saw a small vein meself. And if there's one, there's bound to be more."

Leda's lips curled into a grin. "That's the smartest thing ye've said in a while."

Brokk chuckled, lifting his mug. "If we strike gold, we ain't diggin' for scraps no more."

Tormli muttered, rubbing his sore ribs. "Aye, but it's gettin' past the goblins, the Duergar, and the gods know what else that's the problem."

Leda reached across the table, gripping Ogar's hand.

"If ye find a proper vein, we could leave this life behind," she said softly. "Start somethin' better."

Ogar squeezed her hand in return. "That's the plan."

For now, though—there were other matters to handle.

The next morning, Ogar dragged himself out of bed, still feeling the lingering effects of ale and exhaustion.

But there was no time to lounge about.

The overseer had given him a task—one that was both simple and frustrating.

He had to retrieve the weekly wages for the miners from the Stonehall Treasury.

Which meant dealing with the High Council's scribes.

And that meant… bureaucracy.

Ogar sighed, rubbing his face. "Rather be fightin' goblins."

Still, he grabbed his coat, strapped on his boots, and set out for Stonehall.

The Stonehall Treasury was a massive granite building, towering over the marketplace with thick stone pillars and high vaulted ceilings.

Inside, the air was thick with the smell of parchment, ink, and burning lantern oil.

Dwarves stood in long, miserable lines, each waiting their turn to be ignored or dismissed by overworked scribes.

Ogar sighed as he took his place in line, listening to the grumbles around him.

"Been here since the sun rose," muttered one dwarf behind him.

"Still ain’t got me wages from last month," said another.

"Bah! If the scribes worked as hard as we did, we’d all be rich."

Ogar crossed his arms, watching as dwarves ahead of him argued, shoved papers at the clerks, or outright cursed at the system.

This was going to take a while.

After what felt like hours, Ogar finally reached the front desk, where a bored-looking scribe with spectacles and ink-stained fingers sat behind a massive ledger.

"Name?" the clerk muttered, not even looking up.

Ogar grunted. "I’m here for the miners’ weekly wages."

The clerk flipped through the ledger, running his finger down a long column of names.

Then he frowned.

"Hmm," he muttered. "Can’t seem to find it."

Ogar narrowed his eyes. "What? It’s supposed to be in there."

The clerk adjusted his spectacles. "Well, it’s not. Records say the payment was already processed."

Ogar felt his temper rise. "Processed to who? I’m standin’ right here, and I sure as hell don’t have it!"

The clerk sighed, tapping the ledger with his quill. "You’ll have to check with the records office. If there’s a mistake, they’ll need to verify it before any wages can be released."

Ogar’s jaw tightened. "So… ye’re sayin’ I gotta chase down some damned scribe before the miners get paid?"

The clerk shrugged. "Aye. That’s the process." Ogar exhaled through his nose, clenching his fists. This was exactly why he hated dealing with paperwork.

The records office was at the far end of the Stonehall, past rows of dusty shelves, old scrolls, and ink-stained dwarves muttering over ledgers. Ogar stomped through, spotting an elderly scribe hunched over a stack of books. "Oi," Ogar called out. "Got a problem."

The old dwarf looked up, squinting. "Who are ye?"

"Ogar. Here for the miners' wages. The clerk says the records are wrong."

The scribe sighed, flipping through pages of a smaller book. Then, after a long pause, he muttered, "Ah. Here it is." Ogar leaned in. "So? Where's the money?" The scribe scratched his white beard. "Seems the wages were logged but never signed off for release. Looks like the last scribe on duty forgot to finalize the payment." Ogar gritted his teeth. "Ye mean to tell me a whole crew o' miners ain't gettin' paid because some damned paper wasn't signed?" The old dwarf shrugged. "That's about the shape of it."

Ogar exhaled slowly. "Who signs it?"

The scribe pointed to a desk at the back of the office. "That'd be Scribe Deldar. He's the one who stamps the final approvals." Ogar turned—and saw a dwarf sleeping in his chair.

Deldar, the damned scribe, was slumped over his desk, drooling onto a pile of papers. Ogar stormed over, banging a fist on the desk. Deldar snorted awake, blinking. "Wha—?"

Ogar scowled. "Oi. Ye forgot to approve the miners' wages." Deldar yawned, stretching. "Oh? That's today?" Ogar leaned in, his voice low and dangerous.

"If those miners don't get paid, I swear on me ancestors, I'll drag yer sorry arse down a mine shaft meself."

Deldar gulped, fumbling for his stamping seal. "R-Right. Let's, uh, fix that, shall we?" With one swift motion, he pressed the seal onto the parchment. "Done," he muttered. Ogar grabbed the approved ledger, marched back to the clerk, and slammed it onto the counter.

"Here. Now give me the damned wages." The clerk sighed, reached under the desk, and finally handed him the sealed pouch of gold. "There ye go," the clerk muttered. "See? Easy process." Ogar stared at him, dead-eyed.

Then he turned, walking out of the Stonehall without another word. By the time Ogar reached the miners' barracks, shift change was minutes away. The miners grumbled, expecting yet another delay. Then Ogar slammed the pouch of gold onto the overseer's desk.

"There's yer wages," he muttered. "I had to drag it through layers of incompetence, but it's here."

The overseer grinned. "Didn't punch a scribe, did ye?" Ogar exhaled. "Nearly."

The miners cheered as gold changed hands. Finally, the job was done. But Ogar swore to himself— Next time, someone else could deal with the damned paperwork.

Soon Ogar sat at his kitchen table, staring at the small iron box in front of him.

It was scuffed, its edges worn, the lock rusted with age.

It wasn’t his.

It had belonged to Durgan Stonebrow—a fellow miner who had died in a cave-in nearly a year ago.

Ogar had pulled this box from Durgan’s locker after his passing, intending to return it to his widow and son. But then...

Days had turned into weeks. Weeks had turned into months. And the box had stayed with him. Because, if he was being honest, he hated this sort of thing. Ogar scratched his beard, exhaling deeply. It was time.

He grabbed the box, stood up, and made his way toward the residential halls. The miners’ residential halls were a series of stone-carved apartments, simple and functional, where the families of miners lived. Ogar found the right door, hesitated a moment, then rapped his knuckles against the wood. Silence.

Then, the sound of movement. The door cracked open, revealing a woman in her forties, her dark hair streaked with silver, her eyes tired and sharp. She frowned. "Aye?"

Ogar shifted awkwardly, lifting the iron box. "Ye Durgan’s widow?"

The woman squinted at him. "Who’s askin’?"

"Ogar," he grunted. "I worked with him down in the mines."

Her expression hardened. "What do ye want?"

Ogar scratched the back of his neck. "Ain’t here to cause trouble. Just... Durgan left this behind. Thought it oughta go to ye."

She eyed the box, then him, then the box again. After a long pause, she sighed and pushed the door open wider. "Best ye come in, then."

The inside of the home was modest, a single stone hearth burning low, the table worn from years of use. A young dwarf lad, no older than ten, sat in the corner, whittling a piece of wood with a dull knife.

His mother gestured for Ogar to sit at the table. "So," she said, arms crossed. "What’s in it?"

Ogar cleared his throat. "Dunno. Was locked when I found it. Thought it oughta be yours to open."

She sighed and took the box, running her fingers over the rusted edges. "Did he say anythin’ about it?"

Ogar shook his head. "Not a word. Just... kept it close. Even down in the shafts."

She nodded, reaching into a drawer and pulling out an old key. She slid it into the lock—Click. The box creaked open. Inside, nestled atop a folded piece of parchment, was a single gold coin and a few crumpled silver pieces.

The widow frowned. "What the hell is this?" She lifted the letter, unfolding it with cautious fingers. Her eyes scanned the words. Then, her brows furrowed. Then, her mouth twisted.

"That idiot," she muttered.

Ogar leaned forward. "What's it say?"

She huffed, shoving the letter into his hands. "See for yerself."

The handwriting was messy, uneven—Durgan hadn't been much of a writer. "To whoever finds this—"

"I owe Jorik Stonejaw 15 gold. He said I had 'til the month's end, but if ye're reading this, I reckon I didn't make it. This coin and silvers ain't enough, but maybe it'll keep 'im from bashin' down my door. If I'm gone, don't let the wife and kid deal with this shite. Sort it out, yeah? - Durgan."

Ogar blinked. The widow groaned, rubbing her temples.

"That fool. He never told me he owed money."

Ogar exhaled through his nose. "Jorik's a stubborn bastard. If he ain't got his coin, he'll come collect it from ye."

She snorted. "Like hell he will. He can come and try. I'll be waitin' with a hammer."

Ogar scratched his beard. "Ye sure ye wanna deal with that?"

She folded her arms. "What choice do I got? Ain't got 15 gold just lyin' about."

Ogar glanced at the coin and silvers. A paltry sum. Not enough to settle the debt. Not even close. The widow sighed. "What a mess."

Ogar tapped his fingers against the table, thinking. "Listen," he muttered, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Jorik ain't **the most reasonable dwarf, but he ain't completely heartless. Let me talk to him."

She raised an eyebrow. "Ye'd do that?"

Ogar grunted. "Ye want him knockin' down yer door?"

She considered, then sighed. "Aye. Do what ye gotta do."

Ogar left the home, heading straight for Jorik Stonejaw's usual haunt—

The Golden Beard. The burly dwarf was easy to find—seated in the corner, tankard in one hand, his massive arms crossed over his chest.

Ogar sat down opposite him. Jorik glanced up, raising an eyebrow. "Ye here to drink, or ye here to bother me?"

Ogar set the letter down. Jorik squinted, then grabbed it, reading slowly. His expression darkened. "That dumb bastard," he muttered.

Ogar grunted. "Aye."

Jorik downed his ale, setting the tankard aside. "And I suppose ye're here to ask me to forget the debt?"

Ogar leaned back. "Nah. I know better than to ask a dwarf to do that."

Jorik smiled. "Smart. So what, then?"

Ogar exhaled. "He ain't got the gold no more. Ye go poundin' on his widow's door, she's gonna pound back. Ye really wanna get into a hammer-swingin' fight with a grieving woman?"

Jorik snorted. "No, thanks. I like me skull in one piece."

"Then let's be reasonable." Ogar gestured. "I got five gold right now. That's all I got on hand. Ye take that, and ye leave her be."

Jorik tapped the letter against the table, thinking.

Then, after a long pause, he sighed. "Fine. Five gold, and I don't go after the widow."

Ogar reached into his belt pouch, pulled out five gold coins, and slid them across the table. Jorik grabbed them, nodding. "Fair enough."

Ogar stood up, giving the debt collector one last look. "That's the last of it, then?"

Jorik smiled. "Aye. Consider it settled."

Ogar grunted, turned on his heel, and walked out. Debt paid. Mess cleaned. And hopefully, Durgan could rest easy, wherever he was.

Ogar had barely had time to rest after dealing with Durgan's mess before the mine overseer came knocking again.

"Got a job for ye."

Ogar grunted, rubbing his temples. "Figures."

"Head down to the Lower Cavern Port, see Dockmaster Hrumgral Ironboot. He's got a shipment leavin' soon, and they need strong arms."

Ogar sighed. "Liftin’ crates all day? That’s what ye got for me?"

The overseer crossed his arms. "Ye got a problem with honest work ?"

Ogar grumbled, but shook his head. "Fine. I’ll see it done."

And so, instead of a peaceful day at the tavern, he found himself marching toward the underground docks.

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And so, instead of a peaceful day at the tavern, he found himself marching toward the underground docks.

The Lower Cavern Port was a massive stone-carved dock, set along the black waters of an underground river.

Here, barges and boats carried shipments of stone, ore, and metals deeper into the mountain —where trade routes led to other dwarven settlements and even surface merchants.

The air was thick with the scent of wet stone and burning oil, and dwarves moved quickly, shouting orders, stacking crates, and securing shipments.

Dockmaster Hrumgral Ironboot stood atop a pile of cargo, arms crossed over his massive chest, barking orders like a war commander.

"Oi! Move yer arses! We got a schedule to keep! If this shipment don’t leave on time, I’ll have yer beards as rope!"

Ogar approached, rolling his shoulders. "Heard ye needed a pair o’ strong arms."

Hrumgral turned, eyeing him. "Ogar, aye? About time. Thought ye were nappin’ at the tavern."

"Nearly," Ogar admitted. "What’s the job?"

"Simple." Hrumgral pointed at the crates stacked along the dock. "Move those metal ingots onto the barge. Load ‘em tight, strap ‘em down. We don’t want nothin’ slippin’ into the drink."

"Sounds easy enough."

"Aye? Then move!"

Ogar grabbed the first crate, heaving it onto his shoulder. It was heavy as hell. "Shit," he muttered. "Ye packin’ stone or anvils in these?"

"Both, probably," Brokk muttered, passing by with his own crate. Tormli was already tying down the ropes, securing the loads. "Ain’t so bad if ye don’t think about it.”

Ogar scowled. "I don’t wanna think about it. I wanna get it done."

The dock was a chaotic mess, with dwarves yelling, merchants cursing, and workers shoving crates around like mad. One of the surface merchants, an elf with too-fancy clothes, kept tapping his foot, muttering about "slow dwarven work." Ogar growled under his breath. "Ye wanna help, pointy-ears?"

The elf raised a perfectly trimmed eyebrow. "I am here to oversee. Not to participate."

Ogar snorted. "Figures."

They worked fast, hauling crates, securing the cargo, making sure nothing shifted.

But then— One of the crates rattled. Ogar paused mid-lift, feeling the box shake. Tormli frowned. "What in the hells—?" The crate rattled again.

Brokk, standing nearby, set down his own crate and knocked on the lid. A muffled squeak. Ogar’s eyes narrowed. "That ain’t normal."

Tormli unslung his hatchet. "Only one way to find out." With a quick yank, they pried open the lid. Inside— A small, scrawny goblin huddled against the wooden slats, his beady yellow eyes blinking up at them.

For a moment, no one moved. Then the goblin grinned sheepishly. "Er… hullo."

Ogar sighed, rubbing his face. "Ye gotta be shittin’ me."

Brokk just blinked. "Why the hell is there a goblin in the cargo?"

The goblin shrugged. "I… was just lookin’. And then… uh… the crate closed."

Tormli folded his arms. "That so?"

The goblin nodded enthusiastically. "Aye! Just an accident! I didn’t mean to sneak in!"

Ogar wasn’t convinced. "And ye weren’t plannin’ on sneakin’ into the city, huh?"

The goblin coughed awkwardly. "… Maybe a little."

Brokk shook his head. "Well, ain't that a problem."

Before they could decide what to do, Hrumgral stormed over, scowling.

"What the hell's takin' so long—" He stopped short, seeing the goblin.

His face turned red.

"GOBLIN!"

The dockmaster reached for his dagger, but Ogar raised a hand. "Wait, wait! The little bastard ain't even fightin'!"

Hrumgral snarled. "So what? We don't let goblins roam free, Ogar! We gut 'em!"

The goblin swallowed hard. "I-I would very much prefer NOT bein' gutted."

Tormli scratched his head. "He don't seem violent."

Hrumgral growled. "He's a goblin. That's bad enough. Kill 'im."

Ogar sighed. He didn't like goblins. But something about this scrawny idiot just didn't sit right. And besides— The goblin looked terrified. Ogar cracked his knuckles. "Lemme handle it."

Hrumgral smiled. "Aye. Beat the little shit to death, then."

Ogar stepped forward. The goblin cowered.

"Alright," Ogar muttered, rolling his shoulders. "Sorry about this, lad."

And then—he started beating the goblin. Ogar grabbed the goblin by the collar, lifting him up. The goblin yelped. Ogar swung—but missed completely, punching the air instead. The goblin twitched.

Ogar thumped the goblin's head—gently. The goblin let out a pathetic groan and slumped dramatically. Tormli and Brokk watched, arms crossed. Hrumgral squinted. "…That don't look like a proper beatin'."

Ogar grunted, shaking his fist. "He's… tough."

The goblin whimpered. "Oh no… I am in such pain… ooooh…"

Ogar punched him lightly again. "Take that."

Hrumgral raised an eyebrow. "Ye feelin' alright?"

Ogar huffed. "Aye. Just… makin' sure it's slow."

The goblin collapsed onto the dock. "Owww."

Brokk muttered. "This is the shittiest beatin' I've ever seen."

Tormli sighed. "Just toss him in the river."

Ogar hoisted the goblin up, gave him a wink, and chucked him into the water.

The goblin surfaced, sputtering. "I'LL REMEMBER THIS!"

Hrumgral grunted. "Fine. Long as he's gone." Ogar turned back to the crates. "Right," he muttered. "Back to work."

Celebrations

The Golden Beard tavern was packed to the walls, the air thick with the scent of roasted meats, spilled ale, and pipe smoke.

Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk sat at their usual corner, their tankards full and their plans set.

The dwarven festival was coming, a two-week-long celebration of heritage, craftsmanship, and drinking until one's beard was soaked in ale.

And for miners like them—it meant no work.

Ogar leaned back in his chair, running a hand over his braided beard. "Ain't no better time than now," he muttered.

Tormli nodded, chewing on a thick slice of roast boar. "We go down while the festival's in full swing. No one'll be watchin'."

Brokk grinned, lifting his tankard. "Aye. Let the others drink themselves blind—we got deeper holes to dig."

They clanked their mugs together, sealing the plan.

But first—there was celebrating to do.

The city streets were bursting with life.

Dwarves of all ages and clans filled the walkways, their voices raised in song, laughter, and heated drinking contests.

The stone halls were draped in bright banners, torches blazed in golden sconces, and the smell of meat grilling over open fires carried through the tunnels.

Vendors shouted their wares—

"Freshly baked honey cakes!"
"Roast mutton! Hot and dripping!"
"Dwarven battle-brew! One sip and ye'll forget yer name!"

Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk wandered through the festivities, indulging in roasted meats, rich stews, and thick crusted bread slathered in butter.

At one open square, a group of dwarves danced around a bonfire, their boots stomping in rhythm, their voices raised in a booming drinking song.

Tormli was the first to jump in, pulling a laughing dwarf maiden into a wild spin.

Brokk, already half-drunk, was clapping along, laughing as an old miner tried to balance a full tankard on his head.

Ogar simply watched, sipping his ale, knowing full well that soon, they'd be marching down into the dark once again.

When the festival reached its peak, when the streets were at their rowdiest, and the guards had stopped paying attention to everything but their drinks—

They made their move.

The three dwarves slipped away from the crowded streets, moving quickly toward the mine entrance.

No one stopped them—everyone was too busy drinking, singing, or brawling.

At the edge of the mining district, they entered a quiet tunnel, slipping into the shadows, their boots silent on the stone.

They had prepared for this.

Their armor and weapons were already hidden near the sealed-off entrance, stashed in an old crate.

One by one, they donned their gear, fastening belts, strapping on boots, adjusting weapons.

Ogar checked his short sword, running a hand over the hilt.

Tormli adjusted his hatchet, muttering, "Damn thing better not get stuck in some bastard's skull again."

Brokk, always the most heavily armed, slung his massive axe over his shoulder.

The sealed entrance stood before them—just as they had left it.

Old wooden planks, cracked and worn with time, barely held together.

Ogar pulled away one of the loose boards, creating just enough space to squeeze through.

One by one, they disappeared into the darkness.

Back into the forbidden tunnels.

The journey was long and silent, their torchlight flickering against the cold rock.

The deep tunnels were as they had left them—

Twisting paths.
Echoing silence.
The weight of centuries of forgotten stone pressing down on them.

After hours of walking, they finally reached a familiar sight—

Ouza’s lair.

The lizardman was already waiting, his scaly arms crossed, his bright yellow eyes glinting in the torchlight.

"Ah. You return."

Ogar grinned, lowering his pack. "Aye. And we could use some soup."

Ouza let out a hissing chuckle. "You dwarves always come hungry."

He led them to his firepit, where a thick, bubbling pot of fungi and unknown meat stew simmered.

The dwarves sat, warming themselves, drinking deeply from their flasks as Ouza ladled out portions.

As they ate, Ouza spoke.

"You three are brave to return," he mused. "The deeper tunnels… they are not kind."

Ogar shrugged. "Neither are we."

Ouza let out another hissing laugh.

Brokk, licking the stew from his fingers, glanced toward the rock pools of water in the cavern.

"Gonna swim again?"

Tormli snorted. "After last time? I’ll pass."

But Ogar was already kicking off his boots.

"Bah, ye lot are gettin’ soft," he muttered, wading into the cool underground spring.

As Ogar and Brokk swam, the water lapping against the cavern walls, a figure emerged from the darkness of the cave. Ouza’s sister.

She was perched on a rock, half-hidden in the shadows, her strange yellow eyes watching them. Her scaled naked body glistened, her long fingers idly tracing the stone beside her.

Brokk froze mid-stroke. "She’s watchin’ us again," he muttered.

Ogar glanced over, meeting her gaze. She didn’t speak. Just watched.

Brokk let out a low grumble. "Startin’ to feel like a damn fish on display."

Ogar just smiled. "Could be worse. Could be gettin’ eaten."

Tormli, still sitting by the fire, shook his head. "I dunno what she sees in ye two ugly bastards."

Ouza simply shrugged. "She is curious about surface folk."

Brokk muttered under his breath. "Aye, well… tell her I ain’t for sale."

Ogar let himself float for a moment, letting the cold water wash away the stiffness from the long walk.

Soon enough, they’d be marching into the unknown again.

But for now— He let himself relax. At least, until the real journey began.

The tunnels stretched before them, the silence unnatural, the air thick with decay and something worse.

Hours had passed since they left Ouza’s lair, navigating past the shadowed outskirts of the Duergar city, careful to avoid the gray dwarves’ patrols.

They moved in silence, speaking only in hushed whispers, their torches flickering against the cold stone walls as they pressed deeper into the forgotten tunnels.

Then— after some hours they arrived back at the goblin lair. And it was a graveyard.

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They arrived back at the goblin lair.

And it was a graveyard.

The once crowded, stinking den was now filled with silent corpses.

Dead goblins lay strewn across the ground, their bodies twisted, their limbs gnawed upon, their ribcages split open.

The makeshift wooden walkways had partially collapsed, bloodstains smearing the walls and floors.

Ogar gritted his teeth, stepping over a half-eaten corpse.

"Something’s been here."

Tormli kneeled, pressing a hand to a goblin’s mangled chest.

"Some of these ain’t even rotted yet. This happened recent."

Brokk eyed a bite-marked skull, his fingers running over the deep indentations.

"Teeth. Big ones."

Ogar exhaled, scanning the darkened tunnels ahead.

"Then whatever did this… might still be here."

They pressed on.

Moving beyond the slaughter, they searched the tunnels leading deeper into the underground.

After careful scouting, they found one passage—

A steep, spiraling tunnel that descended sharply, the air colder, thicker, more suffocating the further they went.

It felt ancient.

The stone was rougher, untouched by tools for centuries.

Every step echoed, bouncing back a fraction slower than it should.

Brokk muttered, voice low, "We’re leavin’ goblin lands behind."

Tormli nodded. "Aye. This is somethin’ older."

Then, without warning—

The attack came.

From the shadows ahead, six figures lunged.

Stocky and dwarven in stature, but twisted, feral, monstrous.

Their skin was mottled gray and black, their eyes milky white, their fingers tipped with sharp, jagged claws.

Terrars.

A degenerate, forsaken race of dwarves—those who had dwelled in the Underdark for ages, warping into something no longer kin.

They came with low snarls, their movements unnatural, their voices a guttural growl of hatred.

One slammed into Ogar, claws raking against his armor, driving him back.

He barely raised his sword in time, parrying a wild swing, but another Terrar barreled into him from the side, sending him crashing into the tunnel wall.

His vision blurred as a third came from the shadows—

A blade aimed straight for his throat.

Ogar ducked just in time, the blade slicing past his beard, missing him by inches.

Tormli and Brokk were locked in their own struggles.

Tormli had been snatched by the throat, a Terrar strangling him, its fingers tight as iron around his windpipe.

His face turned red, his legs kicked, his hatchet desperately trying to find purchase against his attacker.

Brokk had been knocked off his feet, a Terrar slamming him into the stone floor with a bone-cracking thud.

His head smashed against the rock, and for a terrifying moment, he didn't move.

Blood trickled from his ears.

Ogar saw it all in flashes.

His own sword locked in a parry, his shoulder aching from the impact.

Tormli's desperate gasps, his eyes bulging as he fought for air.

Brokk sprawled on the ground, his attacker raising a jagged blade for the killing blow.

No.

With a roar, Ogar forced his blade forward, driving it into his attacker's chest.

The Terrar shrieked, clawing at the wound, but Ogar wrenched his sword free and slashed across its throat, sending blackened blood spraying against the tunnel wall. One down.

But Tormli was still choking. Ogar lunged forward, grabbing the Terrar by the hair, and yanked it backward. The creature snarled, twisting, but Ogar smashed the pommel of his sword into its skull, knocking it loose just long enough for Tormli to bring his hatchet crashing into its ribs.

The Terrar shrieked, collapsing. Tormli coughed violently, sucking in precious air. Brokk, still on the ground, let out a guttural groan— And then, suddenly, his attacker stiffened. Brokk's axe was buried deep into its chest. His hand had moved, even half-unconscious, delivering the killing blow. Ogar grinned, even as his chest heaved. "Ye tough bastard."

Brokk groaned, sitting up, wiping the blood from his nose.

"Not as tough as I thought."

But they weren't done.

Four more Terrars still stood, circling them, their feral, hungry eyes glinting in the darkness.

Ogar tightened his grip on his sword. They weren't going down without a fight. The next minutes were nothing but chaos. Ogar swung wildly, his blade finding purchase in snarling flesh. Tormli moved like a whirlwind, his hatchet biting into limbs, hacking away desperately. Brokk, blood dripping from his scalp, fought like a cornered beast, his axe carving deep wounds into their attackers.

The Terrars were strong, but they were sloppy, driven by fury and madness rather than discipline. And one by one, they fell. Ogar buried his sword into a Terrar's chest, twisting deep before ripping it free. Tormli caved in another's skull with a wild overhead swing. Brokk took down the last, hacking away until its body stopped twitching. Then— Silence.

Ogar stood panting, his arms shaking, his blade dripping with Terrar blood. Tormli collapsed against the tunnel wall, clutching his throat, still struggling to breathe. Brokk slumped to the ground, his hand pressed against his temple, still dizzy from the blow he took.

They had won. But barely. Ogar wiped his mouth, spitting onto the stone. "That... was too close."

Tormli nodded weakly. "Aye." Brokk exhaled sharply. "So… we still goin' deeper?"

Ogar glanced down the dark tunnel ahead. They had fought to be here. They weren't stopping now.

"Aye," Ogar muttered. "We keep goin'. But let's not run into more o' those bastards too soon."

Tormli groaned. "I second that." And with that, they limped forward into the abyss. The deep tunnels awaited.

The party limped forward, their bodies aching, their breaths heavy, but their resolve unbroken.

The deep tunnels ahead stretched into darkness, the air thicker, heavier, stale.

Ogar ran a hand across his forehead, wiping away the sweat and blood. "Ain’t gettin’ any easier."

Tormli coughed, his throat still bruised from nearly being strangled by the Terrars. "This place wants us dead."

Brokk, his head still throbbing, chuckled bitterly. "Then it best try harder."

They pressed forward. And then— From the shadows of the tunnel, came a new horror.

They came without sound, their bodies blending with the rock, moving in eerie gliding strides.

Hekkin.

A vile-looking race of humanoids, grotesquely hunched, their skin a mix of leathery gray and fungal growths, as if the stone had tried to absorb them.

Their limbs were too long, their hands tipped with hooked claws, and their faces were a twisted nightmare—

Elongated snouts, like something caught between a rat and a reptile, filled with needle-sharp teeth.

Their eyes were white and sunken, glowing faintly with malicious hunger. They moved fast. Too fast. And before the dwarves could react— They attacked.

Ogar barely had time to raise his sword before a Hekkin lunged at him, its clawed hand slashing for his throat.

He ducked, feeling the air whistle past his ear, then drove his shoulder forward, slamming into the creature’s chest.

The Hekkin hissed, stumbling back, but before Ogar could capitalize, another raked its claws across his back, tearing through armor and flesh.

He let out a snarl of pain, twisting and swinging his blade, catching the bastard across the ribs.

Tormli, still sore from the previous fight, barely managed to parry as two Hekkin came at him from both sides.

One clamped its teeth onto his shoulder, ripping flesh, while the other swiped its claws at his gut.

Tormli let out a roar, headbutting the one biting him, shattering teeth, then buried his hatchet into the other's skull.

Brokk had two on him, one slashing at his legs, the other aiming for his eyes.

He blocked the first with his arm, feeling the pain of claws sinking into flesh, then swung his axe in a brutal, downward arc.

The Hekkin shrieked as its chest split open, but Brokk barely had time to recover before the second leaped onto his back, claws digging into his shoulders.

He staggered, reaching behind him, grabbing the creature's leg, and with a roar, he threw it forward, sending it smashing into the cave wall.

Ogar, blood dripping down his side, fought with wild fury, slamming his sword through the torso of a Hekkin, before twisting the blade free, sending black blood splattering against the rock.

The last Hekkin, sensing its pack was losing, turned to flee—

Only to be caught by Tormli's thrown hatchet, burying deep into the back of its skull.

It collapsed, twitching, before going still.

Silence fell.

The dwarves stood, panting, bodies aching, weapons dripping with blood.

Ogar exhaled, his hands shaking. "That was bad."

Tormli wiped blood from his cheek. "It ain't over."

Brokk, still catching his breath, scowled. "Aye. I can feel it."

And they were right.

Because the ground began to move.

The tunnel trembled.

Rocks shifted, dust cascaded from the ceiling, and then—

The stone beneath them split open.

Eight massive, writhing creatures erupted from the walls and floor, their worm-like bodies glistening with slick, mucous-covered flesh.

Their heads were hideous things, covered in fleshy tentacles, curling and twisting, surrounding a beaked mouth lined with razor-sharp teeth.

Predators.

Ambush hunters.

They had been lurking beneath the rock, waiting for fresh prey.

And now—

They struck.

One lunged at Ogar, its tentacles wrapping around his arm, the suction pulling at his flesh.

The beak snapped, barely missing his face, but its grip tightened.

Ogar roared, twisting his body, stabbing his sword directly into the creature's side.

It shrieked, releasing him, but another came from behind, slamming into him, sending him sprawling across the ground.

Tormli had one wrapped around his leg, its tentacles tightening, pulling him downward toward a hole in the rock.

He swung his hatchet wildly, severing a few tendrils, but the creature's beak snapped shut, nearly catching his boot.

Brokk, already bleeding, charged one head-on, slamming his axe into its face.

The blade bit deep, but the creature writhed violently, wrapping tentacles around his arms, trying to crush him.

The fight became a blur of madness.

Ogar stabbed wildly, tearing into the tentacle-covered beasts.

Tormli, half-dragged into a pit, used his bare hands to pry tentacles from his throat, his face turning purple.

Brokk bit into one's flesh, spitting out the foul taste, just to break free long enough to swing his axe.

Their blades tore flesh, their arms ached, their lungs burned from the sheer exertion.

And one by one, the beasts fell.

Ogar drove his blade into the last, its body twitching violently before it collapsed into a pile of severed tentacles.

Then—

Stillness.

The dwarves stood in the blood-soaked tunnel, gasping for breath, covered in black ichor and deep wounds.

Ogar looked at the carnage, then down at himself. Blood. Too much blood. Tormli staggered to a rock, sitting heavily, his eyes wild with exhaustion. Brokk wiped a hand across his face, leaving a streak of blood and filth.

None of them spoke for a long time. Then— Ogar exhaled, shaking his head. "This is gettin' bad."

Tormli nodded weakly. "Worse than I expected." Brokk spit onto the ground, his voice a low growl. "The deeper we go… the worse it's gonna get."

Ogar knew he was right. And yet— They weren't turning back. With aching muscles and burning wounds, they pressed forward. Deeper into the dark.

The dwarves collapsed onto the cold stone, their bodies aching, bruised, and bloodied, but alive. For now.

Ogar leaned against a boulder, pulling out his waterskin—but this time, there was no water in it. Only wine. He took a deep swig, letting the warm burn spread through his chest, dulling the throbbing pain of their recent battles. Tormli groaned, sitting cross-legged, pulling his hatchet from its belt loop and inspecting the dull, chipped edge. "This thing's taken a beating," he muttered, pulling out a whetstone and slowly dragging it along the blade.

Brokk, still rubbing the blood from his temple, reached into his satchel and pulled out a small book. Ogar raised an eyebrow. "What's that? A love letter from yer long-lost sweetheart?"

Brokk snorted. "Aye, and she's got three arms and a beard longer than yours." Tormli chuckled, but Brokk didn't look up, flipping through the book until he reached the empty leaves in the back. "We been goin' blind through these tunnels," he muttered, licking the tip of his charcoal stub before pressing it against the parchment.

"So, I'm makin' us a map."

Ogar took another drag from his pipe, exhaling a thick plume of smoke, watching as Brokk sketched rough lines onto the page.

He traced their main routes, marking key points—

Ouza's lair.
The goblin nest.
The Duergar outskirts.
Where they fought the Terrars.

A handmade map. A way to keep track of where they were. Tormli nodded approvingly. "Not a bad idea." Brokk grinned. "Aye, and if we make it back, we might even sell this to some fool who wants to follow our footsteps." Ogar huffed. "If we make it back."

They sat there, taking a much-needed break, drinking, smoking pipe, and letting their bodies recover. But the moment of peace was brief. Because the tunnels called them forward. And soon enough, they were on the move again. The path ahead was blocked. A collapsed section of tunnel, the rocks piled high, leaving only a small gap.

Ogar cracked his neck. "Figures." Brokk unslung a pickaxe from his back, tossing it to Ogar. "Dig." Ogar scowled but didn't argue.

He took a deep breath, spat onto his palms, and swung the pickaxe into the rubble. Crack! The first blow loosened a chunk of rock, sending dust into the air. Tormli took a second pick, swinging at the opposite side, their combined efforts slowly clearing a narrow path. After what felt like an eternity, they crawled through the opening, emerging into a strange, cavernous space. And what they saw inside… Stopped them cold. The stench hit them first. A putrid mix of sulfur, burnt flesh, and something deeply rotten in the air.

The chamber beyond was large, its walls covered in deep, unnatural carvings, etched with symbols that seemed to shift under torchlight.

At the center stood a stone altar, and looming behind it— The same Demonic Statue.

The same grotesque idol they had seen before— At the goblin lair. At the rat nest. A monstrous horned figure, its jagged maw stretched into an eternal scream, its clawed hands outstretched.

But this time— They weren't alone. Terrars filled the room. But these were different. They were cloaked in black and reddish robes, hoods draped over their deformed faces. And they were chanting. Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk stayed in the shadows, peering through the gaps in the rocks, watching. The Terrars swayed, whispering in a guttural, rasping tongue. Their voices rose in unholy unison, and the words slithered through the air like creeping rot:

"Ashnak vel'gur shorra ka-multh!"
"We give our flesh, we give our souls!"

"Hir'gan korvas nahn ghur!"
"Through pain, we find ascension!"

Then— The perversions began.

Terrar women, just as twisted, were dragged toward the altar, their bodies already scarred and burned, their eyes void of sanity. The hooded priests ripped their robes away, their clawed hands caressing their flesh, whispering feverishly.

Ogar's stomach turned. But worse still— The molten metal was brought out.

The Terrars took iron bowls, filled with glowing molten ore, and began to pour it onto their own bodies. Burning flesh. Sizzling skin. The stench of agony. They didn't scream.

They moaned in ecstasy. They welcomed the agony, laughing madly as the metal seared into their flesh. Ogar gritted his teeth, feeling his fists tighten. Tormli swallowed hard. "This ain't right." Brokk whispered, "This is worse than wrong."

The ritual continued, the Terrars chanting louder, their bodies writhing in both torment and pleasure. And then— They turned toward the altar. There, a Terrar priest, his face half-melted, raised a curved dagger. A sacrifice was about to be made. Ogar felt his blood boil. His fingers wrapped around his sword hilt. "We stoppin' this?" Tormli whispered.

Brokk exhaled, shaking his head. "Ye want to charge in against all o' them?" Ogar hesitated, watching the blade rise above the sacrifice. They were outnumbered. And if they interfered now, they might not survive. But could they truly stand by and watch?

Ogar tightened his grip on his sword, his knuckles white with tension.

Tormli wiped sweat from his brow, eyes darting between the nude, writhing figures before them.

Brokk, already licking his lips in anticipation, muttered, "They got no armor. They're distracted. If we're ever gonna take 'em down—it's now."

Ogar nodded, voice low and steady. "We hit hard, we hit fast. No mercy. They ain't feelin' pain, so we cut 'em apart until they stop moving."

Tormli flexed his fingers, shifting his grip on his hatchet. "Aye. Let's butcher the bastards." They braced themselves. And then— They charged.

They rushed from the shadows, their blades flashing, catching the Terrars completely off guard.

One priest, his hands still dripping with molten metal, barely had time to turn before Brokk's axe cleaved into his skull, splitting his face in two.

A female Terrar, mid-moan, shrieked in surprise as Tormli's hatchet buried itself deep into her ribs, cutting through flesh and bone.

Another Terrar, lost in ecstasy, tried to scramble for a weapon—

But Ogar was on him in a flash, swinging his sword in a brutal horizontal arc, severing the Terrar's leg just above the knee.

The creature toppled, landing on the blood-slicked altar, his white eyes rolling in his skull, but— He didn't scream. Instead— He laughed.

A wild, grotesque grin spreading across his face, his hands reaching for his missing limb as if in awe.

"Hah… hahahahaha! The flesh is nothing! The pain is joy!"

Ogar felt a chill crawl up his spine.

Even dismembered, these creatures felt no agony.

And they would fight until their bodies simply couldn't move anymore.

The orgy had turned to chaos.

Naked Terrars, some still tangled in each other, writhed in confusion, their drug-fogged minds struggling to react.

Some lunged forward in blind rage, scratching and biting, while others grabbed rusted daggers from the floor, joining the battle in a savage frenzy.

Brokk swung his axe, hacking into a Terrar's side, but before he could free his weapon, a naked, snarling Terrar woman launched herself at him.

Her clawed hands raked across his face, drawing deep bloody lines.

She wrapped herself around him, her legs locking around his waist, her teeth sinking into his shoulder like a rabid beast.

Brokk roared, twisting, trying to throw her off, but she held on, biting deeper, her lips curled into a twisted grin.

"Sweet flesh! Delicious flesh!" she muttered against his skin, her voice breathless, almost sensual.

Brokk staggered, smashing his back against the stone wall, but the Terrar woman refused to let go, her teeth ripping at his skin.

"GET OFF ME, YE BLOODY FREAK!"

Ogar slammed his foot into a fallen Terrar's chest, pinning him down. With one brutal motion, he brought his blade down in a hard swing— And hacked off the creature's genitals. The Terrar twitched violently, his eyes rolling back, his tongue lolling out—But his twisted smile remained.

"Yesssss! Rip me! Tear me! Let my blood feed the dark!"

Ogar felt rage boil up inside him.

"Then DIE, ye sick bastard!"

He drove his sword down, impaling the Terrar through the throat, twisting the blade until the light faded from its eyes. One down. More to go.

Tormli was locked in a vicious struggle, slamming his hatchet into a Terrar's arm, trying to disarm him.

But then— One of the Terrar priests, still standing near the altar, grabbed a bowl of molten metal, its contents glowing red-hot. With a wicked grin, he hurled it toward Tormli. The liquid fire splashed against his neck, instantly searing his flesh.

Tormli screamed, dropping his weapon, clawing at his own throat, trying to scrape off the molten iron.

The Terrar priest laughed, raising another bowl.

"Let the pain purify you, dwarf! Become one with the Dark Hunger!"

But before he could throw another—

Brokk, still twisting and staggering with the biting woman on his back, swung wildly—

And his axe caught the priest mid-chest, splitting him in half.

The Terrar priest crumpled, his body still twitching, his fingers grasping at the air, even in death.

With half the Terrars dead, the remaining ones fought like animals, snarling and clawing, blood smeared across their naked bodies.

Ogar, his breath ragged, dodged a wild lunge, countering with a vicious thrust that pierced through a Terrar woman's back, skewering her spine.

Brokk finally ripped the crazed woman off him, slamming her to the ground before bringing his boot down onto her skull, crushing it like a melon.

Tormli, despite his burned flesh, gritted his teeth through the pain, grabbed his hatchet, and buried it into a Terrar's throat, hacking and hacking until the head came loose.

One by one, the last of the cultists fell.

Until there was silence.

Blood pooled across the floor.

The air reeked of charred flesh, sweat, and something foul.

Ogar wiped his sword clean, his hands shaking from the adrenaline.

Brokk sat down hard on a fallen body, pressing a hand to his bleeding shoulder.

Tormli, still gritting his teeth, touched the burn on his neck, wincing as the raw flesh peeled under his fingers.

Ogar exhaled.

"That… was vile."

Brokk spit onto the ground. "Aye. And we ain’t seen the worst of it yet."

The party trudged down the darkened tunnel, their bodies aching, their wounds still fresh, but their minds set on pressing forward.

The air grew warmer, a strange heat pulsing from deeper within.

Ogar wiped sweat from his brow, glancing at the walls.

They were different here.

No longer rough, natural stone—these were smooth, carved with runes, ancient inscriptions that seemed to glow faintly as they passed.

"Ye feel that?" Brokk muttered, rolling his shoulders.

Tormli nodded, still favoring his burned neck. "Aye. Like somethin’ callin’ from deep inside."

They took a right turn, stepping into a vast chamber. And what they saw— Took their breath away.

Before them stood a massive forge, still burning with a deep, unnatural flame, despite what must have been centuries of abandonment.

The stone walls of the chamber were covered in soot, yet the intricate carvings of ancient dwarven craftsmanship remained untouched by time.

At the center—

A forge so large it could temper the weapons of kings.

The embers within glowed not red, but deep blue, radiating a heat that seemed alive, as though the mountain itself breathed fire into the room.

Scattered throughout the chamber—

Massive anvils, each etched with runes, their surfaces marked with old hammer blows.

Workbenches, still littered with tools, half-forged weapons, and pieces of armor long left unfinished.

Ogar stepped forward, running his hand along a rusted warhammer, its head still embedded in a block of iron.

"Whoever worked here… they never finished."

Tormli bent down, picking up a dented helmet, turning it over in his hands. "Like they left in a hurry."

Brokk let out a low whistle. "A place like this… it's worth more than gold."

Then— A gust of hot wind rushed through the chamber.And from the darkness— Something moved. At the far end of the chamber, standing before the great forge, a figure emerged. A dwarven skeleton, clad in thick, rune-inscribed armor, its bones blackened by centuries of heat. Its hollow eye sockets burned with pale blue fire, its broad hands gripping the handle of a massive smith's hammer.

It took a step forward, the ground shaking beneath its weight. Then— A voice, deep as the roots of the mountain itself, echoed through the chamber: "Who dares stand before the Forge of the First Smith?"

Ogar tightened his grip on his sword. "We ain't here to steal nothin'. Just passin' through."

The skeletal dwarf raised its hammer. "Only the worthy may walk these halls. Prove yourselves… or be reduced to ash." Then it attacked.

The Ancient Smith charged forward, swinging its massive hammer in a devastating arc.

Ogar barely had time to dodge, feeling the rush of heat as the hammer smashed into the ground, sending cracks through the stone.

"Shit! That thing's got power!" Tormli yelled, rolling away as the Guardian turned toward him.

Brokk, already moving, brought his axe down toward the skeletal warrior's shoulder. Clang! The strike landed—but barely dented the armor. The runed plates absorbed the force, and the Guardian barely flinched. Then— It swung its fist, catching Brokk right in the chest.

The blow sent him flying backward, slamming into an anvil, his breath ripped from his lungs. Tormli moved in, swinging his hatchet at the joints, trying to disarm the creature.

But the Guardian moved with unnatural speed, catching the hatchet mid-air, twisting it from Tormli's grip and hurling him aside.

Ogar gritted his teeth. "Fine. Ye want a real fight?" He charged. The Ancient Smith swung again, the hammer descending like a falling mountain. Ogar dodged just in time, feeling the heat of the impact as it splintered the stone floor. Tormli and Brokk recovered, flanking from both sides, slashing at the legs, trying to unbalance the undead warrior.

The Guardian turned, but Ogar seized the opening. With a battle cry, he leapt forward, driving his sword deep into the exposed joint of the skeleton's armor. The blade sank deep, cracking through ancient bone. The Guardian staggered, its blue-flamed eyes flickering.

Brokk drove his axe into the back of its knee, bringing the massive warrior down to one leg. Tormli—despite his burns—grabbed a smith's hammer from a workbench and swung with all his might, smashing the Guardian's skull.

The flames in its eyes flickered… then died. The skeleton crumbled, collapsing into a pile of ancient armor and bone.

Silence filled the forge. Then, a whisper— "You… are worthy."

A spectral figure rose from the fallen **Guardian's remains.

A dwarven ghost, broad-shouldered and strong, his eyes glowing softly, his arms crossed.

"You have proven your strength," the ghost rumbled. "And so… you shall be rewarded."

He lifted a hand, and the forge flared with blue fire.

The heat did not burn.

Instead—

The dwarves felt a strange energy wash over them, their armor shimmering faintly, glowing with new power.

Their gear was changed.

Each of them felt their armor pulse with new energy—not overwhelming, but subtle and potent. Ogar's Breastplate – "The Emberguard"got runes of resistance that now glowed faintly across the plates. It would lessen the force of heavy blows, absorbing some of the impact. Tormli's Gauntlets – "The Hands of the Smith" now pulsed with warmth, his grip feeling unnaturally strong. Weapons would not slip from his grasp, and his hatchet would strike truer. Brokk's Greaves – "The Stonewalker's Stride" felt heavier, more grounded, yet strangely fluid. His footing was unshakable, making it harder to be knocked down or staggered.

The ghost nodded in approval. "You carry the spirit of warriors and smiths alike," he said. "Let the mountain's fire burn within you."

Then— He faded, vanishing into the blue flames. Leaving them standing alone in the sacred forge.

Ogar adjusted his newly blessed breastplate, exhaling. "Well," he muttered. "That was worth the fight." Tormli grinned, flexing his newly strengthened grip. "Aye. And we ain't stoppin' here." Brokk, feeling the stability in his stance, smiled. "Then let's keep movin'. The deep ain't seen the last of us yet."

They turned to the next tunnel, stepping beyond the holy forge. The darkness awaited. And they marched forward.

The tunnel ahead sloped gently downward, the air growing heavier, thick with the scent of old parchment, stone, and something ancient.

Ogar, still adjusting his newly blessed breastplate, felt a strange stillness in the air—not the usual oppressive weight of deep tunnels, but something more deliberate.

Then, they stepped into the library.

The chamber was massive, stretching beyond the reach of their torchlight—but no flame was needed.

Softly glowing runes pulsed on the stone-carved shelves, casting a dim, ethereal light across the dust-covered tomes, scrolls, and rune-etched tablets that lined the cavern walls.

But what struck them most— Was the silence. Ogar opened his mouth to speak—but no sound came. Tormli clapped his hands—but the sound barely echoed. Brokk stomped his boot, expecting the usual deep reverberation of stone, but the noise vanished almost instantly. "This place… it eats sound," Tormli muttered, his voice oddly muffled, like speaking underwater.

Ogar nodded, running a finger along a dust-covered tome.

"This ain't like the last library we found. This is somethin' older. Something important."

Brokk scanned the shelves, his eyes darting over the titles etched into stone tablets.

Many were written in ancient dwarven script, unreadable even to them.

But some stood out: "The Song of the Anvil" – A forgotten treatise on how rhythm and song enhance dwarven smithing techniques. "War of the Thirteen Kings" – A historical account of an ancient dwarven civil war that shattered the old empire. "The First Five Axes" – A book detailing legendary weapons forged in the dawn of dwarvenkind, their locations unknown. "Hearth and Hammer" – A text blending philosophy and warfare, claiming that a good warrior must also be a good craftsman.

Tormli reached for a scroll, but before his fingers could touch it— A low, grinding sound echoed from the shadows. Something moved.

From the far end of the chamber, a hulking figure emerged.

A stone automaton, towering at least seven feet tall, its body carved from polished obsidian, its rune-covered chest pulsing faintly with golden light.

It moved slowly, each step sending a low vibration through the floor, its massive stone hands clasped behind its back.

When it spoke, its voice was deep, smooth, and methodical. "You are not of the Archivists."

Ogar instinctively reached for his sword, but Brokk held up a hand. "Hold. It ain't attackin'. Not yet, anyway."

The automaton turned its featureless face toward them, its runes shifting slightly.

"This is the Silent Archive. State your purpose." Ogar cleared his throat. "We seek knowledge. We mean no harm."

The automaton was silent for a moment, then nodded.

"Knowledge is to be shared, but only to those who prove themselves seekers of wisdom. I am Keeper-Karvax, last of the Archivists. I have maintained this place for 3,248 years. What is it you seek?"

The dwarves exchanged glances. Brokk, ever the practical one, spoke first. "What happened here? Why is this place abandoned?"

The automaton's runes flickered, as if remembering something long buried. "Time is the enemy of all things, even the wise. The scholars who once walked these halls perished, faded, or fell to war. Knowledge remains, but its keepers do not."

Tormli, rubbing his burned neck, frowned. "And the silence? Why does sound die here?"

Keeper-Karvax inclined its head slightly. "The Silent Wards. The scholars who studied here believed that true understanding comes in the absence of noise. No distractions. No interruptions. Only thought."

Ogar crossed his arms, looking around at the endless rows of books and tablets. "If we were lookin' to learn a thing or two, what would ye recommend?"

The automaton gestured toward a side chamber, where a stone lectern stood, atop which several tomes rested. "These texts enhance the understanding of warriors. Take them, and you shall learn." Ogar frowned. "Learn what, exactly?" The automaton's eyes glowed faintly. "See for yourself."

Ogar reached for the first tome, its black leather cover marked with silver runes.

The moment his fingers touched the page— A flood of knowledge poured into his mind. Suddenly, he understood footwork better, the weight of his blade made more sense, his stance felt steadier, more natural. It was as if he had spent years training in a single moment. Tormli, pulling another tome, felt his axe grip adjust without thinking, his swings becoming smoother, faster. Brokk absorbed techniques that he had never practiced—but suddenly knew how to execute.

"What in the bloody hells is this?" Ogar muttered, flipping through the pages, though he didn't need to read anymore.

The knowledge was simply there. Keeper-Karvax nodded. "The greatest warriors were also the greatest students. These texts were crafted not just to be read, but to be understood. You have learned, because you are meant to."

Tormli, still reeling, muttered, "Well, I ain't complainin'." Brokk chuckled. "If only all learnin' was this easy." Ogar grinned. "This'll come in handy." Then, Tormli's eyes fell on another book.

A massive tome, bound in blackened leather, its cover embossed with twisting underground tunnels and strange creatures.

Its title read:

"The Abyss Below: A Bestiary of the Deep"

Tormli whistled. "Now this looks useful."

He flipped it open, scanning the pages filled with sketches of monstrous things.

Eyeless beasts.
Tentacled horrors.
Creatures that fed on stone, on blood, on magic itself.

"Ain’t never seen half these things," he muttered.

Ogar glanced over his shoulder. "Then we best be ready when we do."

Brokk tucked his newly learned techniques into memory, slamming his book shut. "This was a good find." Ogar looked back at Keeper-Karvax. "Ye’ve been a fine guide. We appreciate it."

The automaton simply bowed. "Knowledge is meant to be carried forward. Use it well, warriors of the deep."

The party turned toward the next tunnel. With newfound strength, greater skill, and a map of unthinkable horrors ahead— They marched deeper. Into the unknown.

Ghol-Vorrak

The tunnels stretched on, winding deep into the earth, the air growing warmer with every step.

Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk walked in relative silence for a time, their minds still lingering on the Silent Archive and the books they had absorbed.

Then, Ogar broke the silence.

"Ye ever wonder why the Duergar and the Terrars got so damn twisted?"

Tormli scratched his beard, considering. "Aye. We all come from the same stock, don’t we? Same ancestors?"

Brokk, still glancing at the dark stone around them, grunted. "Somewhere along the way, they lost their way."

"How?" Ogar pressed.

Tormli sighed. "Look at ‘em. The Duergar turned bitter, full o’ hate and greed. The Terrars? Lost their damn minds. Became animals."

Brokk nodded. "Maybe it’s the deep itself. Maybe the deeper ye go, the worse it gets."

They pondered on that, their boots crunching against the stone, their torches flickering as the air turned from stale cold to dry heat. Then— They saw it. A red glow ahead. The tunnel opened up. And they stepped into the impossible.

The city stretched before them, built into the remains of a half-collapsed volcanic cavern.

Massive lava flows carved paths through the stone, illuminating the city with a hellish orange-red glow.

Bridges of hardened obsidian and basalt spanned the rivers of molten rock, and the structures —tall, imposing—were chiseled from blackened stone and metal.

Forges burned endlessly, casting sparks into the air, while massive figures moved in the streets, their hulking bodies glistening with heat and power.

The Ashblood Ogrun.

The Ogrun were like ogres, but twisted by fire, shaped by the molten veins of the Underdark.

Their obsidian-black skin shimmered in the forge light, cracked in places, revealing veins of glowing molten heat running through their flesh like living magma.

Each one stood over nine feet tall, their massive frames thick with muscle, their arms covered in hardened stone-like plating.

They wore armor of blacksteel, their eyes smoldering like coals, their voices deep, like rolling thunder. Yet— They did not attack.

Ogar, gripping his sword hilt, exchanged a look with Brokk and Tormli.

"They ain’t hostile," Tormli murmured. "Not like the Duergar or the Terrars."

Brokk nodded. "Ain’t lookin’ at us like prey. They’re watchin’ us like traders."

Ogar exhaled. "Then let’s see what they’ve got."

The Pyre Market sprawled across a wide stone platform, surrounded by lava pits and searing forges.

Stalls were carved into the rock, with Ogrun merchants displaying wares forged in volcanic heat. Fire-Tempered Blacksteel Armor – Metal that could withstand immense heat and still remain cool to the touch. Magma-Gems – Glowing red-orange stones, rumored to hold the power of fire spirits. Obsidian Blades – Swords and daggers razor-sharp, able to cut through stone like butter. Forged Bone Charms – Trinkets crafted from the remains of deep-dwelling beasts, enchanted to protect from heat and flame.

Ogar stopped at a weapons stall, eyeing a blacksteel short sword, the hilt carved like molten rock.

"Ye ever seen metal like this?" he muttered.

The Ogrun smith, a towering figure with molten veins, crossed his arms.

"This is no surface steel, dwarf. This is Ghol-Vorrak iron, cooled in the embers of the chained one. It does not dull in flame, nor break in battle."

Ogar grinned. "Aye? Sounds like somethin' I could use."

Brokk was already examining a battle-axe, running his fingers over the obsidian edge.

Tormli, however, was eyeing something else. Gold. Among the trinkets and baubles, Ogar noticed pouches of raw gold nuggets, stacked carelessly in one of the stalls.

The Ogrun, it seemed, had little interest in gold—perhaps because their forges burned hotter than greed.

Tormli nudged Ogar, whispering. "They don't care much for gold. But we do."

Ogar smiled. Brokk, still holding his battle-axe, murmured, "We takin' some?" Ogar glanced around—the Ogrun were massive, but they weren't watching too closely. He nodded. Slowly, they inched toward a pile of gold nuggets, each one fitting nicely in a palm. With quick, practiced hands, Ogar and Brokk each scooped a few into their satchels, keeping their movements casual.

Tormli, however— Got greedy. He reached for a second handful, his fingers closing around another set of nuggets— When a massive shadow loomed over him. A massive Ogrun warrior, clad in obsidian-plated armor, stood behind him. His smoldering eyes looked down at the dwarves, his expression unreadable. For a tense moment— No one spoke.

The Ogrun's massive hand hovered near his hammer. Ogar, thinking fast, grabbed Brokk's arm and laughed loudly. "Bah! Ain't every day ye see gold just layin' around like river stones!"

The Ogrun warrior narrowed his glowing eyes. Then—

A deep, rumbling chuckle.

"Dwarves and their love for gold," the Ogrun muttered, shaking his head. "Greedy little stonefolk. But no thief would be foolish enough to steal from the Ashblooded."

Tormli swallowed hard. Ogar grinned. "Aye. Only a fool would do such a thing." The Ogrun smiled. "Then drink with me, dwarves. And let your gold stay in your pockets. "

Ogar nodded. "Aye. We'll drink."

The tavern was carved straight into the black volcanic rock, the air thick with heat, the walls lined with obsidian slabs, and the ceiling dripping with moisture from the cavern's volcanic humidity.

A massive Ogrun bartender stood behind the stone counter, his obsidian-black skin cracked with glowing red veins.

Strapped to his back was a massive keg, bound in thick leather strips, with a hose attached to it, from which he poured thick black liquid into crude iron mugs.

The liquid sludged out like tar, its aroma a mix of burnt wood, charcoal, and strong spirits.

Ogar sniffed his mug and raised an eyebrow. "What in the hells is this?"

The Ogrun warrior who had invited them—Gorr'Khul, a towering brute with a magma-streaked beard and battle-scarred chest—laughed deeply.

"This is Ashblood Brew, dwarf. Stronger than any weak surface ale. A drink for warriors. It burns, but makes ye stronger!"

Tormli smiled, eyeing the black sludge in his cup. "Stronger, eh? Or just more blind and stupid?"

Gorr'Khul grinned, lifting three massive cups—one in each hand and another balanced on his forearm—and downed them all at once.

The other Ogrun warriors cheered, slamming their mugs against the stone tables.

"Drink, dwarves! Show yer strength!"

Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk glanced at each other.

Ogar grinned. "Aye, let's see if this swill is as bad as yer faces." They lifted their mugs—And drank. The moment the thick liquid touched their tongues, a wave of intense heat burned through their throats, settling into their bellies like molten rock.

Ogar slammed his fist onto the table, coughing. "By the gods, that's—" Tormli clenched his teeth, his eyes watering. "That ain't drink, it's liquid damnation!" Brokk's face turned red, his beard damp with sweat. "I think my guts just turned to lava."

The Ogrun warriors howled with laughter, banging their fists on the table.

Gorr'Khul leaned forward, smiling. "Not bad for stonefolk. Most outsiders take one sip and pass out."

Brokk wiped his mouth. "That would've been the smart thing to do."

Gorr'Khul grinned. "Since ye ain't weaklings, I got a challenge for ye." The Ogrun around them quieted. Gorr'Khul leaned closer, his molten eyes narrowing. "The Crucible Arena."

The arena was built into the volcanic heart of Ghol-Vorrak, where cracked stone platforms jutted out over molten lava flows.

Heat rose in waves, the air choked with the scent of charred rock and sweat.

All around, Ogrun warriors cheered, roared, and slammed their fists on the stone benches, their voices deep like rolling thunder.

At the center, a massive pit stretched out, ringed with magma-filled trenches, where warriors had to prove their strength.

A hulking Ogrun stood in the middle, twice the size of a man, his arms as thick as tree trunks, his blacksteel armor steaming from the heat.

The Champion of the Crucible.

Gorr'Khul shouted to the crowd, raising his fist.

"These dwarves have come from the stone above, but do they have the strength of fire?!"

The Ogrun roared in response. Gorr'Khul turned to the party, his grin wicked. "Defeat my champion, and ye shall have your pick of the Emberforged Armor. Lose—" He chuckled darkly. "And ye'll see if yer bones float in lava."

Ogar cracked his knuckles. "We ain't dyin' today."

Tormli twirled his hatchet. "Aye. Let's give 'em a show."

Brokk stretched his neck. "Hope ye bastards are ready."

The Ogrun Champion rolled his massive shoulders, stepping forward, his obsidian fists cracking with heat. Then— The fight began. The Ogrun Champion moved shockingly fast for his size. He swung a massive hammer, the force of the strike shattering stone as Ogar rolled to the side just in time.

Tormli came in low, swinging his hatchet at the Champion's knee, but the Ogrun kicked him away like a ragdoll. Brokk, using his weight, went for a wide axe swing, aiming for the Champion's ribs—

But the Ogrun caught the blade mid-air, yanking Brokk forward and slamming his fist into Brokk's gut. Brokk collapsed to his knees, gasping. The crowd cheered wildly.

"FIGHT, STONEFOLK! SHOW US FIRE!"

Ogar spat blood and gritted his teeth. "Enough of this!" He charged, his sword glowing faintly with the blessings from the Forge of the First Smith.

The Champion swung again, but this time— Ogar dodged under the blow, driving his sword into the Ogrun's exposed ribs. The Champion grunted, stepping back—his first real wound. Tormli pushed through his pain, getting up with a roar and hacking into the Champion's

thigh, cutting deep. Brokk, still catching his breath, let out a growl and swung his axe straight for the Ogrun's knee.

The blow cracked the bone. The Champion stumbled, his massive form wavering. The crowd fell silent. Then— With a final mighty swing, Ogar brought his sword down onto the Ogrun's shoulder, cutting through armor, flesh, and molten veins.

The Champion collapsed. And the fight was won. The Ogrun warriors stood silent. Then— They erupted into cheers.

Gorr'Khul stepped forward, grinning. "Ye fought well, dwarves. And ye have earned yer prize." He gestured toward a row of armor, forged in the flames of the city, their blacksteel plates reflecting the molten glow.

Each dwarf chose one piece: Ogar – The Emberguard Helm which is fire-resistant, protects against heat-based attacks, and allows clear vision even in thick smoke. Tormli – Ashblood Gauntlets that absorb heat, allowing him to grip heated weapons or metal without burning. Brokk – Magma-Walker Boots with enhanced footing, resistant to slipping or staggering in unstable terrain, especially over lava flows.

Gorr'Khul nodded approvingly. "Now ye wear the fire of Ghol-Vorrak. May it serve ye well in the dark." Ogar smiled, adjusting his new helm.

The tunnels twisted and coiled, leading the dwarves deeper into the belly of the mountain, where the air grew heavier, hotter, thicker with an unnatural warmth.

Lava trickled down the walls in thin, glowing veins, searing cracks in the black rock, illuminating their path with an eerie, shifting light.

Each step forward felt like crossing into another world, deeper, more alien, more forbidden.

Ogar wiped sweat from his brow, muttering. "Feels like we're walkin' into the heart o' the damned earth."

Tormli adjusted his Ashblood Gauntlets, flexing his fingers. "Aye. If we go any deeper, we'll be meetin' the gods o' fire themselves."

Brokk exhaled, his breath coming out in a thin mist despite the heat. "Then let's hope they don't mind uninvited guests."

Then— A sound. Faint. Wet. Like flesh shifting, twisting, reforming itself.

Ogar froze. "Did ye hear that?" Tormli turned, eyes narrowing into the shadows.Brokk gripped his axe tighter. Then— A voice. A perfect copy of Ogar's own.

"Help me."

The air shifted, the heat warping the stone like a fevered mirage.

From the darkness, four figures emerged—but they were wrong.

Their bodies rippled, crimson flesh bubbling and shifting, refusing to settle into one shape.

One moment, they had elongated, talon-like fingers. The next, their arms folded inward, collapsing into a featureless, rippling mass. Their faces were the worst part. They changed constantly.

Ogar saw his own reflection, twisted and wrong, staring back at him with a grinning, unnatural expression. Tormli saw his brother's face, a dwarf who had died in the mines years ago. Brokk saw a woman's face, one he had long buried in his memories. And then, in unison, they moved.

The creatures lunged, flesh twisting mid-motion, their arms elongating into razor-thin claws.

Ogar barely managed to duck, feeling the air slice open behind him—those claws moved like a whisper, faster than steel.

Tormli roared, swinging his hatchet, but the blade cleaved through one creature's chest like it was cutting water.

The wound sealed itself instantly, the flesh shifting back into place.

"They're regeneratin'!" Brokk bellowed, dodging a Vhraal's swipe.

One of them wrapped itself around Ogar, red ichor oozing from its body, trying to smother him.

Its face warped, shifting between his mother's, his own, and something ancient and eyeless.

Ogar growled, "I ain't fallin' for yer tricks!"

He slammed his fist into its chest, pushing it back—just in time for Tormli to grab a burning torch from his belt and drive it into the creature's side.

The Vhraal screamed. It wasn't just fire that hurt it— It was destruction. "Burn 'em! Fire's the way!" Ogar bellowed.

Brokk tore an oil flask from his belt, smashed it over the closest Vhraal's chest, and with one quick strike, ignited it with a spark from his axe.

The creature shrieked, its form melting into bubbling red sludge.

One by one, the dwarves burned them down, reducing their unnatural shifting bodies into nothing but sizzling gore. Then— The final Vhraal twitched, its face locking into a horrible, stretched-out scream— Before it collapsed into a pool of liquid flesh. Silence. The dwarves stood there, panting, weapons still raised.

"What in the name o' the gods were those?" Tormli spat.

Ogar shook his head. "Not natural. Not right."

Brokk gritted his teeth. "If they come from deeper… I don’t wanna know what else is waitin’ for us." Then— The ground rumbled. A deep, earth-shaking tremor.

And something massive stepped out from the next tunnel.

Five hulking figures emerged from the darkness, each standing over ten feet tall, their four-armed bodies rippling with fused stone and crystal.

Their flesh was no longer flesh.

It was rock, metal, and something unnatural, their limbs plated with mineral deposits, their eyes glowing dim amber.

Their jaws split open into serrated mandibles, chattering in low, rumbling hunger.

And in their massive hands— They held warhammers as thick as a dwarf’s torso.

One of them spoke, though its voice was deep, broken, like stone grinding against stone.

"You hold the metal. We take. You… break." Then they charged.

The first hammer swing hit the ground so hard, the entire tunnel trembled, sending Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk stumbling back.

"They’re slow! We gotta move fast!" Ogar shouted, dodging a second crushing blow.

Brokk swung his axe, aiming for the closest Krallnox’s neck—

The blade bounced off, barely leaving a scratch.

"Shit! They’re armored like mountains!"

Tormli, gritting his teeth, reached for a weak spot— The eyes. He threw his hatchet, the blade spinning through the air— It buried itself deep into the Krallnox’s amber eye.

The creature roared, staggering back, its body convulsing.

"The eyes! Aim for the eyes!" Tormli bellowed.

Ogar drove his sword upward, piercing into another Krallnox’s eye socket, the molten heat from his Emberguard Helm guiding his strike true.

The beast howled, clawing at its face— But they still weren’t going down. Brokk scanned the tunnel, seeing the lava trickling down the walls. "We need to burn ‘em! Just like the last bastards!"

Ogar grinned. "Aye. Let’s give ‘em fire!"

They baited the Krallnox toward the lava flows, dodging their massive swings as the creatures moved in unison, like shock troopers of an unseen army.

Then— Tormli and Brokk lured one to the very edge. Ogar, with a final, brutal push, slammed into its chest—The Krallnox stumbled—And fell, its stone body sinking into the molten rock.

The others fought until the end, but one by one— The dwarves brought them down, using fire, sharp strikes, and their wits. The final Krallnox stood alone, eyes glowing, chest heaving — Then, with one last breath, it solidified, its body hardening into stone. A statue. A monument to its own defeat.

Ogar leaned against the wall, panting. Tormli sat on a rock, wiping blood from his lip. Brokk stared at the statue of the last Krallnox, shaking his head.

"If those things were just guards…" Ogar muttered.

Tormli looked at him. "Then what in the hells are they guardin'?" Brokk tightened his grip on his axe. "Let's find out." And with that— They moved deeper. Into whatever awaited.

The glow of molten rock behind them slowly faded as the party ventured deeper into the tunnels, following a winding path of black stone and heat-seared rock.

The air grew dense, humid with the weight of the deep. Then— Tormli stopped.

"Wait." Ogar turned, frowning. "What is it?"

Tormli pointed ahead, where a faint shimmer gleamed in the rock wall. Gold.

Not just a few veins—a rich, untouched deposit, running through the stone like veins of fire.

Brokk exhaled, stepping forward, running his calloused fingers over the mineral streaks.

"By the gods… this is untouched."

Ogar grinned. "Ain't gonna be untouched for long."

They unslung their pickaxes and got to work.

Each strike sent a satisfying crack through the cavern, loosening chunks of raw gold, sending tiny flecks scattering across the ground.

Tormli gathered handfuls of nuggets, stuffing them into his satchel, grinning like a man who just found his life's fortune.

Brokk dug deep, prying out thicker chunks, the metal still warm from the pressure of the earth.

Ogar chuckled, wiping sweat from his brow. "This is it, boys. This is what we been needin'."

Then— Something whispered. A sound like rotted wind sighing through hollow lungs. Then another. A dozen.

And the darkness moved.

Shambling figures emerged from the shadows, their twisted bodies covered in thick, stone-like cysts, their skin stretched tight over hollow bones.

Their mouths were sealed shut, stitched together with iron wire, though faint, pained whispers seeped through their lips like a soundless curse.

Their empty eyesockets wept black fumes, curling like tendrils of shadow around their skeletal faces.

And then— They lunged.

The first one reached Ogar, its jagged claws swiping toward his throat.

He barely blocked it in time, the force of the blow sending him skidding back.

Brokk swung his axe, cleaving into the nearest wretch's chest—

The blade sank deep—

But instead of blood, a thick, black cloud burst forth.

"Shit! Smoke!" Brokk coughed, stumbling back, his vision clouding.

Tormli took a step forward, hacking at another, but the thing didn't even flinch, its cracked hands clawing at his legs, dragging itself forward.

Ogar twisted, swinging his sword into the side of one wretch's skull, splitting it open.

But again— The body burst apart, releasing a wave of suffocating darkness.

Their lungs burned. Their vision blurred. And still, the wretches came.

"They ain't stoppin'!" Tormli roared, backing toward the wall.

Ogar gritted his teeth.

Then— He remembered the books.

"Them things are cursed," he muttered, looking at the gold they had just dug.

And then he had an idea. He grabbed a handful of gold dust, clenched it in his fist, and hurled it into the black mist.

The moment it touched the cursed fog— The smoke screeched, recoiling, twisting violently before dissipating.

Brokk saw it too. "Gold! It repels 'em!"

Tormli grabbed a handful from his pouch, flinging it toward the advancing horde.

Where it landed, the wretches howled, their flesh convulsing, burning away.

They threw every piece of gold they had, coating their weapons, rubbing dust onto their blades.

And this time—

Their attacks burned straight through the creatures.

One by one, the wretches collapsed, their forms unraveling into streams of black vapor.

And then— It was over. The cavern fell silent.

Tormli collapsed against the wall, coughing. "If we ever dig up gold again, let’s not do it so loud."

Ogar, panting, muttered, "Aye. But at least we still got some o’ the haul."

Brokk, still catching his breath, nodded. "And we ain't dead yet."

Then— The ceiling shifted. Clicking.

A sound like blades scraping against rock. And from above— Something dropped.

They descended from the shadows, dropping like stone daggers, their chitin-covered bodies twisting as they landed.

Each one stood tall and gaunt, their insectoid limbs barbed, their four arms ending in curved, serrated claws.

Their heads were covered in twisted, bone-like antlers, their maws clicking constantly, their voices a droning, wordless hymn.

And when they moved— It was fast.

The first one struck fast, its limbs flashing in a blur, slicing across Ogar’s forearm before he could even react.

The wound burned. Venom.

"They’re fast! Keep movin’!" Brokk bellowed, rolling as one Skerrith lunged toward him, its claws slicing through empty air.

Tormli barely managed to dodge another, but then—

A second one came from behind, wrapping its limbs around his chest, its mandibles splitting open, clicking violently.

Ogar swung his sword, cutting through one’s chitinous arm, but the creature barely reacted, stepping back, watching him with cold, hive-minded precision.

They weren’t just fighting.

They were coordinating.

"They’re movin’ like one mind!" Brokk growled, smashing the flat of his axe into one’s twisting head, sending it reeling.

Ogar took a risk, stepping back toward the lava trickles on the wall.

One Skerrith lunged at him—

And he sidestepped, grabbing it by the twisted antlers and slamming its face straight into the molten rock.

The chitin melted instantly, the creature screeching, convulsing as its body crumpled.

Tormli, still struggling, drove a dagger into the Skerrith’s side, its paralysis venom slowing his movements—but not stopping him.

Brokk grabbed one of the Duskwretch’s rusted weapons, a jagged iron spear, and hurled it straight into a Skerrith’s chest, pinning it to the wall.

Ogar slammed his sword through another, its horrid clicking slowing, then stopping. The final one twisted, sensing it was alone now. It let out a single droning cry— And then— Collapsed, its hive-mind severed.

Ogar wiped black ichor from his blade, breathing hard. Brokk leaned against a boulder, exhausted. Tormli, still shaking off the venom, sighed. "Ye ever get the feelin’ we ain't supposed to be down here?"

The clang of pickaxes rang through the stone as the party chipped away at the gold veins, filling their satchels with precious nuggets.

Ogar wiped sweat from his brow, feeling the ache deep in his muscles.

Brokk grunted, shifting a chunk of gold in his hands. "If we make it outta here alive, we’re gonna be richer than the High King himself."

Tormli chuckled, dropping another handful of nuggets into his pouch. "Aye, but we ain’t leavin’ yet. There’s still deeper to go."

They pressed on. Into the next cavern. And that’s when it hit them. The air changed the moment they stepped inside. Not hot, not cold—just… wrong.

A great cavern stretched before them, the walls lined with crumbling banners, their emblems long forgotten.

Rusting weapons lay strewn across the ground, abandoned by hands long since turned to dust.

A faint mist curled through the air, carrying with it… voices.

Murmurs. Whispers. A hundred voices, speaking as one. And then— They saw them.

The figures emerged from the mist, their glowing forms flickering, as though struggling to stay in this world.

Their bodies were wrapped in tattered banners, their armor rusted but still bearing the marks of long-lost legions.

Their eyes were hollow pits, but runes burned into their spectral skin, pulsing with magic that refused to die.

They stood like a disciplined army, their ranks silent, weapons drawn.

And when they spoke—

Their voices overlapped, creating a low, eerie drone. "You are not of the war. You do not belong." Ogar's grip on his sword tightened. "We ain't here to fight ye."

The voices shifted. "All who enter… must fight." And then— The first spectral sword swung.

Ogar barely had time to raise his blade before the first warrior lunged. The phantasmal sword passed through his armor, but it wasn't steel that cut him— It was his strength. His willpower. The moment the blade touched him, his limbs grew heavy, his mind clouded, his body suddenly drained of all fight. Tormli was already clashing shields with another warrior, his hatchet swinging, but each strike passed through them.

"They're barely solid!" he shouted.

Brokk swung his axe, his blade slicing clean through a ghost's chest—

But the warrior simply flickered, stepping back, untouched.

Then— Ogar felt the cold. Not just cold. The absence of warmth. His breath misted, ice forming along the edges of his beard. Tormli staggered back, his fingers numb, his legs heavy. Brokk cursed, his grip shaking, the very will to lift his weapon slipping away.

And still— The Legion did not stop.

"We have fought for centuries. We will fight for eternity. You will fall as all others."

Ogar felt his knees buckle, his vision dimming.

"Shit—Tormli, Brokk—!"

And then—He saw it. A new warrior appeared—stepping from the mist to replace the one Brokk had killed. They weren't just fighting an army. They were fighting an endless war.

"We… can’t… win this." Tormli gasped, struggling to keep his shield up.

Brokk gritted his teeth, barely holding back a ghostly halberd aimed at his chest. "Then we RUN!"

Ogar knew he was right.

With one last burst of strength, he slammed his shoulder into the nearest spectral warrior, buying a fraction of a second—

"GO!" They turned— And fled.

The Legion did not run. They marched. Silent, relentless, their eyes burning with the need to fight, to kill, to consume.

The tunnel twisted and turned, the dwarves stumbling, gasping for air, their bodies sluggish, their wounds burning with unnatural cold.

Brokk’s leg gave out first. He hit the ground, slamming into the stone with a pained grunt. Ogar turned back, grabbed him by the arm, yanking him up. "Ye ain't dyin' here!" Tormli was bleeding from his nose, his face pale, his fingers twitching.

Their bodies were giving out. But ahead— A faint red glow. Heat. Lava.

They burst out of the tunnel, tumbling into a familiar cavern, where the molten rivers of Ghol-Vorrak still burned bright.

The moment they crossed the threshold— The Legion stopped. The ghosts lingered at the tunnel’s edge, the runes on their bodies flickering. They could not pass. They could only wait. And then, like vanishing mist, they faded into nothing.

Ogar collapsed against the wall, gasping for breath. His limbs ached, his very soul felt drained. Tormli was shaking, his hands gripping his head. Brokk’s face was pale, his lips blue, his breathing shallow.

None of them had escaped unscathed. Ogar looked at his arm, where the ghostly blade had passed through— The flesh was still there, but the warmth was gone. As if a piece of his soul had been cut away. Tormli exhaled. "That was… worse than anythin’ we’ve faced."

The dwarves sat near a small fire, made from dry spider silk they had gathered earlier. The flames flickered a strange blue, burning longer than wood would have, yet producing no smoke.

Ogar stretched his aching limbs, feeling the weight of the ghostly wounds still clinging to his bones.

Brokk leaned back, still pale from the draining touch of the Murmuring Legion.

Tormli poked at the fire with his hatchet, muttering, "We ain't ever fought somethin’ like that before. Felt like they were takin’ a piece o’ me every time they struck."

Ogar grunted, reaching into his satchel and pulling out a healing potion.

"Drink. Rest. We ain’t done yet."

They drank their potions, letting the warmth seep into their limbs, dulling the lingering pain.

Then, after a few hours of dreamless sleep, they ate—dried meat, bread, and whatever edible fungi they had stuffed in their packs.

Brokk clenched his jaw. "Back to the Terrars’ ritual site then?"

Ogar nodded, his grip tightening on his sword hilt. "Aye. Time to see what they were hidin’."

And so— They ventured back into the dark.

The ritual chamber was as they had left it—stale with the scent of burned flesh, the remnants of the perverse gathering long since abandoned.

But now— They noticed something else.

A side passage leading to a spiral staircase, carved from black stone, winding downward into the deep.

The air grew colder, the stone slick with dampness.

The walls— Covered in deep claw marks. Some large, as if something had tried to claw its way up. Some small, like scratching hands reaching out from the depths.

Tormli ran his fingers along the scars, frowning. "Something tried to get out." Brokk inhaled sharply. "Or something's still waitin’ down there."

They began to descend. The air tightened as they moved down, the stairs creaking, loose stones crumbling beneath their boots. One wrong step—and they would plummet into the abyss below. Then— A whistle in the air.

Ogar barely had time to react before a black-iron javelin tore through the shadows, grazing his shoulder.

Tormli cursed, ducking as another javelin embedded itself into the stone near his head.

Brokk stumbled, nearly slipping over the edge as he barely dodged another projectile.

They looked up— Terrar scouts clung to the walls above, their pale, stretched faces grinning, their bulging eyes wide with malice.

"They’re usin’ the tunnels! They hit, then vanish!" Brokk yelled.

One Terrar hissed, throwing another javelin— Ogar raised his shield, deflecting it just in time. Tormli reached for his throwing hatchet, letting it fly— CRACK!

It struck a Terrar in the chest, sending the scout tumbling down the abyss, his scream swallowed by the endless dark. The other Terrars shrieked and scuttled back into the walls, disappearing into their burrows. The air fell silent. They waited. Nothing. For now.

Ogar exhaled, gripping his shoulder wound. "Bastards won't stay gone for long." Brokk nodded. "Let's move before they come back with friends."

They pressed on, finally reaching the bottom of the staircase. They reached a chamber.

The chamber was once a place of worship. Now— It was a twisted nightmare of corruption. Statues of dwarven ancestors, once carved with reverence, had been defaced—their faces distorted into snarling, demonic grimaces. The great stone brazier, once lit in honor of Moradin, the Soul Forger, now burned with a blue-green flame, casting shadows that moved on their own. The walls whispered. Not in words—but in agony. And from the darkness of the shrine— The Terrar cultists emerged.

They came with war picks, their crude weapons etched with profane runes, their pale, scarred bodies covered in ritual markings.

Ogar met the first one head-on, his blade clashing against a jagged war pick, sparks flying. Tormli swung his hatchet, cutting deep into another's ribs—but the Terrar did not flinch, only grinned, letting the blood run down his chest. Brokk buried his axe into a cultist's shoulder—

The Terrar shrieked—then exploded into black smoke. The smoke twisted, forming into a shadowy horror, its limbs writhing into whip-like tendrils. It lashed out, striking Ogar across the chest. His armor held— But his left arm snapped. A sickening crack echoed through the chamber as pain shot through his body.

"Shit! Me arm!" Ogar bellowed, staggering back.

Tormli barely had time to react before a cultist grabbed him by the throat, lifting him off the ground and slamming him into the wall.

A spurt of blood erupted from his mouth, his vision going white.

Brokk turned—

And his mind shattered.

His eyes locked onto the brazier, where the shadows twisted into impossible shapes, screaming faces of the damned.

His hands shook.

His legs weakened.

And without another word— He ran. Fled. Out of terror.

From the depths of the shrine, a figure stepped forward. A towering Terrar, clad in demonic plate armor, its metal fused with bone and pulsating runes.

Kravzul.

His face was hidden behind a jagged iron mask, his eyes glowing a sickly green. The corrupted statues around them shuddered, their stone faces crying blood. And Kravzul raised his blackened staff. "Kneel before the Deep One's will. Or be unmade."

Ogar gritted his teeth, clutching his broken arm. Tormli coughed blood, but tightened his grip on his hatchet. Brokk was gone, lost to fear. But they would not kneel. Ogar spit at the warlock's feet. "Go to hell."

Kravzul laughed. And the battle began.

Kravzul's twisted form loomed over Ogar and Tormli, his warped armor steaming with unholy energy, his glowing green eyes burning with wicked intent.

The statues of corrupted dwarven ancestors wept black blood, their stone faces twisting into howling expressions.

The warlock raised his staff, the shadows seething around him like a living entity.

Tormli, barely able to stand, spit a mouthful of blood onto the floor.

Ogar, his left arm shattered, clenched his sword with his remaining hand, his legs shaking from exhaustion.

This was it. This was where they would die.

Then— A hissing battle cry split the air.

From the shadows of the stairwell, they leaped into the shrine—thirty lizard warriors, led by Ouza. They came with fury, their slitted eyes gleaming, their curved obsidian blades raised high.

Kravzul twisted, snarling, his clawed hand flexing in frustration.

Ogar and Tormli barely had time to register what was happening—

Before the lizards crashed into the cultists like a tidal wave of fury. The first lizard warriors landed among the Terrar cultists, their weapons flashing in the cursed light. Steel met flesh, war picks clashed against obsidian blades, the sound of ripping throats and breaking bones filling the air.

A Terrar cultist lunged at Ogar, his war pick aimed for the dwarf's throat. Ogar twisted, his one good arm slashing across the cultist's gut, splitting him open. Tormli, still bleeding heavily, grabbed a fallen war pick, jamming it into the skull of another Terrar that tried to pin him down. But the cultists were strong.

One of the lizard warriors was impaled, a Terrar shoving a jagged blade through his chest, hissing in triumph—

Before another lizard warrior leaped onto his back, biting into his exposed throat, ripping it clean open.

More cultists swarmed Ouza, their blades striking wildly.

He ducked beneath a pickaxe, rolled, then drove his twin daggers into a Terrar's ribs, ripping them sideways in one motion.

A Terrar spellcaster at the far side of the chamber began to chant, his hands crackling with black energy.

He raised his hands—unleashing a blast of demonic fire.

Two lizard warriors were engulfed, their bodies twisting in agony before they collapsed into smoking husks.

Ouza roared in fury, dodging a cultist's blade before flipping over a corpse and driving a spear straight into the spellcaster's skull.

More Terrars kept coming.

Twenty lizard warriors had already fallen, their blood pooling around the cursed altar.

But still— The lizards fought. And in the center of the chaos— Kravzul stood motionless. Watching. Waiting. And then, he moved. With one swipe of his claw, Kravzul ripped through two lizard warriors, their bodies splitting open like butchered meat.

Ouza rushed him, his daggers flashing—but Kravzul caught his wrist in mid-air, twisting viciously. Ouza snarled, trying to stab with his other hand, but the warlock slammed him to the ground, pinning him beneath his clawed foot. "You are insects. You do not belong in the Deep." Kravzul's voice was a guttural growl, inhuman, layered.

He raised his staff, aiming it at Ouza's chest— But before he could strike— Ogar roared, charging forward despite his shattered arm, his sword gleaming in the cursed light.

Kravzul turned, swinging his clawed gauntlet— And Ogar ducked beneath it, twisting his blade straight into Kravzul's ribs. The warlock howled, stumbling back.

Tormli, barely able to stand, grabbed a war pick from the ground, hurling it with every last ounce of strength he had. The pickaxe struck Kravzul's shoulder, knocking him off balance.

Brokk, who had fled earlier, suddenly rushed back into the shrine, shaking with rage. His eyes were wild, his breath ragged, but he was no longer afraid. "You don't get to haunt my fuckin' mind!" he bellowed, swinging his axe with all his might.

The blade crashed into Kravzul's skull. The warlock froze. His eyes flickered. And the statues began to crack. The cursed fire in the brazier sputtered. The weeping blood from the stone dwarves boiled away.

And Kravzul— Collapsed. His demonic armor crumbled. His staff split in two. His form faded into black smoke. And he was gone.

The shrine fell silent. The lizard warriors, once thirty strong, now stood at only five. Twenty-five of Ouza's kin lay dead, their blood soaking the cursed stone. Ouza, panting, wiped black ichor from his blades. "That… was too close."

Ogar, gripping his broken arm, gave a pained grin. "Aye. But we ain't dead." Tormli coughed, still tasting blood. Brokk stared at the ashes of Kravzul, exhaling shakily. "That… bastard's dead. Finally."

Ouza turned to them, his slitted eyes narrowing.

"I had scouts following you. In case ye needed help. The Deep is too dangerous for a party so small."

Ogar grinned. "Aye. And it's a damn good thing ye did."

He reached into his satchel, pulling out a handful of big gold nuggets.

"For ye and yer fallen kin. A thanks, from the dwarves."

Ouza took the gold, staring at it for a moment, then gave a sharp nod.

"You are warriors. You fight with fire. The Deep will not forget you."

The surviving lizard warriors gathered their dead, dragging the fallen Terrars into a pile.

Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk—exhausted, battered, but victorious— Turned toward the exit of the shrine.

Home mine

The journey back to the surface was long, winding through tunnels that now felt familiar, but still carried the ever-present weight of the Deep.

Ouza and his remaining lizard warriors parted ways, vanishing into the shadows of their lair, their reptilian eyes glowing like tiny embers before they disappeared.

For nearly a full day, Ogar, Tormli, and Brokk climbed, crawled, and walked through the underground, passing old battlefields, collapsed tunnels, and silent, eerie chambers where their past battles had taken place.

It wasn't until they saw the first wooden scaffolds, the lantern-lit tunnels, and the distant sound of dwarves mining—

That they knew they were home.

Back at their work spot, the three of them sat on a wooden crate, their bodies sore, their bags heavy with gold.

Ogar pulled out his satchel, tipping the gold nuggets onto the table.

Tormli whistled, rubbing his bruised ribs. "That's a damn fine pile."

Brokk smiled. "Aye. We fought for every last nugget, that's for sure."

They split the gold evenly, each of them filling their pockets, the shine of their hard-earned wealth almost making the pain worth it.

Almost.

Ogar, gripping his aching left arm, stood up with a grunt. "I gotta see Mara. Me arm's feelin' like it was stuck in a forge and kicked by a mule at the same time."

Tormli stretched, yawning. "Aye, go get that fixed. Me? I'm off to drink till I forget half o' what we just lived through."

Brokk patted his pouch of gold. "Drinks are on me tonight."

Ogar grinned. "Ye just don't get thrown in the dungeon again."

Brokk snorted. "No promises."

Mara's small hut was packed with herbs, dried plants, and bottles of thick-smelling potions. The old herbalist and healer sat behind a wooden table covered in scrolls, her eyes narrowing as Ogar walked in.

She took one look at his arm, shook her head, and muttered, "By Moradin's beard, dwarf, what did ye do to yerself this time?"

Ogar winced as he sat down. "Got me bones turned to gravel by some demon-lovin' bastard in the deep."

Mara huffed, grabbing his arm roughly.

"Stop whinin'. I've seen goblins with worse wounds act tougher than ye."

She began muttering in an ancient dwarven tongue, her fingers glowing faintly as runes formed over his broken bones.

Ogar groaned. "That's warmin' up somethin' fierce."

Mara smiled. "Aye, it's called healin', ye big oaf. Hold still."

The pain slowly faded, replaced by a tingling warmth.

Mara grabbed a bundle of herbs from a nearby shelf, shoving them into a small satchel.

"Rub this on the wound twice a day, and don't be swingin' any axes for a week."

Ogar grinned. "Aye, aye. I'll be good."

Mara narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "That's the biggest lie I've heard all week."

Ogar chuckled, taking the herbs and heading out.

When Ogar finally stepped through his front door, the familiar scent of wood shavings, fresh bread, and burning firewood filled the air.

Leda sat by the fireplace, sharpening a small carving knife, her dark braid draped over one shoulder.

The moment she saw Ogar, her eyes flicked to his arm, then to the bruises across his face.

She sighed. "What part of 'don't get yerself killed' do ye not understand?"

Ogar dropped his satchel of gold onto the table with a heavy thud.

Leda raised an eyebrow. "That's either a fine apology, or a bribe to keep me from yelling."

Ogar grinned, flopping down into a chair with a groan. "Bit of both."

Leda crossed her arms. "And what's the 'high price' ye had to pay for it?"

Ogar lifted his bandaged arm. "Couple'a broken bones. Almost got me soul sucked out. Nearly got eaten by lizard people. And I had to fight alongside a naked cultist orgy."

Leda blinked.

Then she leaned against the table, smiling. "Sounds like a good time. Should I be jealous?"

Ogar snorted. "Only if ye got a taste for bald, screamin' lunatics covered in molten metal."

Leda chuckled, shaking her head. "I'll pass."

She walked over, kneeling beside his chair, brushing his beard with her fingers.

"Ye need rest, Ogar. I can see it in yer face. Sleep. I'll make somethin' warm for ye when ye wake."

Ogar smiled, leaning his forehead against hers. "Ye're too good to me."

Leda smiled. "Aye. But if ye get yerself killed, I'll kill ye again, ye stubborn bastard."

Ogar laughed. "Deal."

Ogar slept deeply, the weight of the Deep finally lifting from his bones.

For a full week, he did nothing but rest, Leda feeding him, keeping him from being too stubborn, and making their home more comfortable.

His arm healed quickly, thanks to Mara's herbs, but the memories of the Deep—

The gold, the creatures, the horrors waiting below— Those lingered. One evening, as he sat near the fire, Leda curled up beside him, head resting on his shoulder.

She muttered, "Ye ever think maybe them tunnels were sealed off for a reason?"

Ogar stared into the fire, silent for a long moment. Then—he sighed. "Aye. I do."

She smiled. "And ye still wanna go back, don't ye?" Ogar chuckled, rubbing his bandaged arm. "Aye." Leda shook her head. "Ye're impossible." Ogar grinned. "That's why ye love me." Leda rolled her eyes, kissing his cheek. "Aye. That, and the gold." Ogar laughed, pulling her closer.

For now, he had his home, his love, and time to heal.

Ogar's bones still ached, but after a few days of rest, he could already feel the itch to move, to work, to do something other than sit at home.

He wasn't the type to stay idle.

So, when the job order came in, he didn't hesitate.

The King's Road—one of the most vital pathways in the entire underground city—needed repairs.

The massive stone bridge that connected the central city to the outer tunnels had started to show cracks, and if those cracks spread, the entire structure could collapse, cutting off trade and travel.

It was a big job, one that required miners, masons, and stone-cutters to work together.

And Ogar had been assigned to help.

When Ogar arrived at the construction site, he could already see the damage.

The great bridge arched over a deep abyss, its pillars carved from ancient stone, now scarred with fractures and wear.

Dwarves moved busily, hauling stone, mortar, and chipping away at loose debris before it could cause more structural damage.

Master Engineer Korlun Brickthane stood near the edge of the bridge, his thick grey beard tucked into his tool belt, shouting orders at a group of workers struggling to lift a massive support beam.

"By the Stonefather’s hammer, if ye drop that, I’ll throw ye into the abyss meself!"

Ogar smiled, walking up. "Sounds like yer havin’ a grand time, Korlun."

Korlun turned, his sharp steel-blue eyes narrowing. "Ogar, ye lazy sod, ‘bout time ye showed up. Grab a hammer and get to work! We got a bridge to save!"

Ogar cracked his knuckles. "Aye, aye, keep yer beard on."

He grabbed a chisel and hammer and got to reinforcing the stone supports.

The work was tough, but familiar.

Sweat dripped from Ogar’s brow as he carved away loose debris, widening the cracks just enough for new mortar to be pressed in.

The air was filled with the sound of hammering, stone grinding against stone, and the occasional string of dwarven curses whenever someone dropped a tool or smashed a finger.

At one point, Ogar and another worker hauled a massive slab of fresh-cut stone to one of the weakened bridge pillars.

"Watch yer end! I ain’t holdin’ this alone!" Ogar grunted, the weight making his muscles burn.

The other dwarf, a younger worker named Rurik, huffed. "I got it, I got it! Quit yer barkin’!"

They set the stone in place, and the masons immediately got to sealing it with mortar, chiseling it in to make it fit.

"Good work, boys! That’s one less problem to worry about. Now move yer arses, we got more to do!" Korlun barked.

As the work continued, Ogar began to overhear whispers among the workers.

They spoke in hushed voices, throwing glances toward the lower foundations of the bridge.

"Ye heard about the tunnel down there?"

"Aye, smugglers been usin’ it fer years, they say. Movin’ contraband right under the city’s nose."

"They say it’s got an entrance right beneath the bridge supports. I dunno how the city guard ain’t found it yet."

Ogar narrowed his eyes. A smuggler’s tunnel? Right under their feet?

He said nothing, but kept his ears open.

Later that evening, as the work team finished reinforcing one of the lower support beams, Ogar was assigned to check the deepest part of the foundations.

It was dark, the air damp, the stone cold and old.

Torch in hand, he moved between the massive stone pillars, checking for any more fractures or weak points.

That's when he saw it.

A thin crack along the foundation wall, barely visible, except—

There was air coming through it.

Not the stagnant air of the abyss, but something moving.

Ogar stepped closer, running his hand along the crack, and felt something strange.

The stone wasn't solid.

It had been hollowed out.

He pressed against it—and a section of the wall shifted.

A secret door.

Ogar exhaled. "Well, shit."

Ogar stood before the hidden passage, the faint whisper of moving air from behind the cracked stone gnawing at his mind.

This wasn't just a weak part of the bridge's foundation. This was deliberate.

A smuggler's tunnel, running right beneath one of the most vital routes in the city.

Someone had dug this out carefully, made sure no one would notice. But he had. And he wasn't about to ignore it. He turned on his heel, heading straight to the city's guardhouse.

The Stonehall Guard Office was dimly lit, the air thick with the scent of old parchment, ale, and steel oil.

Behind a broad stone desk, Captain Varlek Ironbrand—a thick-bellied dwarf with a beard black as coal and eyes sharp as a dagger's edge— looked up from his ledger.

Ogar planted his hands on the desk, voice steady.

"Found a smuggler's tunnel under the King's Road. Right in the bridge foundation."

Varlek's bushy brows lifted slightly. He leaned back in his chair, crossing his thick arms.

"That so?" he muttered, as if Ogar had just mentioned finding a loose nail instead of an entire gods-damned tunnel.

Ogar frowned. "Aye, that's so. Big enough for folk to move goods through. Didn't look like it was built yesterday either."

Varlek drummed his fingers on the desk, exhaling slowly through his nose. Then, he sighed.

"Alright. Here's what's gonna happen."

Ogar straightened.

"I'll send a couple o' my boys to take a look." Varlek's voice was slow, measured, like a man choosing his words carefully. "And in the meantime…"

The captain reached under his desk, pulling out a small leather pouch.

He set it down with a soft thud. Ogar didn't need to open it. He could already hear the clink of gold inside. "That's ten gold." Varlek's eyes didn't leave Ogar's. "Ye forget what ye saw, and this tunnel don't exist."

Silence. Ogar stared at the pouch. His fingers twitched.

It was good coin. More than what he'd make in weeks of back-breaking work in the mines.

He could buy better gear. More supplies. Hell, even take Leda somewhere nice for once. But it was also a weight. A weight that said this tunnel had been known about. That the smugglers had friends in high places.

That maybe the authorities weren't just turning a blind eye… but were part of it.

Ogar exhaled. "So that's how it is, then?"

Varlek shrugged. "That's how it's always been, lad. Now, are ye takin' the gold or makin' yer life harder?"

Ogar clenched his jaw. His fists tightened. Then, without a word, he reached forward— And grabbed the pouch. Varlek grinned. "Smart lad. Now get yerself a drink. And don't be askin' too many questions."

Ogar turned without another word, walking out of the guardhouse, the weight of ten gold heavier than it should've been.

Months passed and Ogar was doing his regular work at the mines. Then he was given a task. Ogar was no stranger to working deep in the tunnels, but this job felt different.

When the High Council and the King's Treasurer himself handed down an assignment, it wasn't something a miner could just refuse.

So, when he was called into the great stone hall of the city's treasury, where Thrain Goldkeep, the King's Master of Coin, sat behind a massive iron-plated desk, he knew this wasn't just some routine task.

Thrain was a short, stocky dwarf, even by dwarven standards, his massive golden beard braided into thick rings, his piercing grey eyes constantly moving, calculating every detail like a man counting coins even in his sleep.

He looked up when Ogar stepped inside, tapping his fingers on a thick ledger book.

"Ogar, aye? The miner?" Ogar nodded. "Aye."

Thrain gave a short grunt. "Good. We need someone who knows stone, not just numbers." He slid a sealed parchment across the desk. "There's been… concerns."

Ogar raised an eyebrow. "Concerns?" Thrain exhaled, rubbing his temples.

"The Royal Vaults. They hold the kingdom's gemstones, reserves of gold—untouched wealth meant for the High King's coffers. The stone-sealed chambers haven't been opened in decades."

Ogar's fingers tightened slightly. "But something's changed, hasn't it?" Thrain nodded, his expression unreadable. "A minor crack in the outer wall. Not enough to cause collapse… but enough to suggest something—or someone—has been tampering with it."

Ogar crossed his arms. "And ye need me to check if someone's been diggin' in?"

Thrain gave a sharp nod. "Aye. Find any sign of breach and report back. If there's nothin', all the better."

Ogar took the sealed parchment, slipping it into his belt.

"I'll have a look."

Thrain leaned forward, his grey eyes narrowing slightly.

"And Ogar?"

Ogar paused. "Aye?"

Thrain's fingers tapped the ledger book again, slowly.

"This is a royal matter. Best ye don't ask too many questions. A man who digs too deep sometimes finds things he don't like."

Ogar smiled, tipping his helmet back.

"Aye, well, I've already dug me way into worse."

Thrain gave a knowing chuckle.

"That, I believe."

The King’s gemstone vaults lay in the deepest part of the city, locked behind massive iron-banded stone doors, guarded by steel-clad warriors whose axes never left their hands.

Ogar was escorted by two royal guards, their expressions stone-faced, their armor gleaming in the dim torchlight.

As they marched deeper, the air grew thick, heavy with the scent of old stone, metal, and wealth.

When they reached the main vault chamber, one of the guards, Varrik, turned to Ogar.

"This is where ye work. If ye see anythin’ out o’ place, report it. Don’t go wanderin’ too far."

Ogar snorted. "Aye, aye. Not plannin’ to steal the King’s gold, if that’s what yer worried about."

The vault doors groaned open, revealing a breathtaking sight.

Stacks of gold ingots, crates of raw gemstones, runes glowing faintly on the walls, enchanted to keep thieves and decay at bay.

Ogar stepped inside, the echo of his boots against stone sounding almost too loud in the silent, sealed chamber.

He set to work, moving along the walls, tapping the stone, checking for signs of tampering.

At first, everything seemed normal. The walls were solid. The supports were stable. Until— He saw it. A crack. Tiny, almost unnoticeable, running along the far left wall, barely the width of a coin.

Ogar frowned, running his fingers along the edge. The crack was fresh. And worse— There was air moving through it. Ogar crouched, pressing his ear to the stone. For a moment, there was nothing.

Then— A scuttling sound. Ogar jerked back. Something was behind the wall. His instincts kicked in. Ogar reached for his chisel and hammer, working carefully, prying at the weakest part of the crack.

A small stone came loose, revealing a thin tunnel behind it—too small for a dwarf to crawl through.

But just big enough for something else. The air was cold, damp, and smelled of something… unnatural.

Ogar leaned closer, holding his torch up to get a better look— And that’s when he saw it. Eyes. Glowing, pale yellow eyes staring at him from the darkness of the tunnel.

Ogar’s blood ran cold. The creature was small, hunched, its long fingers clutching the stone, its skin pale and slick, like something that had never seen the light.

It didn’t move. Didn’t blink. Just watched him. Ogar took a slow step back. "Shit."

Ogar didn’t waste time. He sealed the small tunnel opening back up, marking the stone with chalk before turning on his heel and marching straight back to the guards.

Varrik looked up as he approached. "Found somethin’?" Ogar exhaled, nodding once.

"Aye. There’s somethin’ movin’ behind the vault walls. Something… small. But it ain't a rat."

Varrik frowned, exchanging a glance with the other guard.

"You sure?"

Ogar’s jaw tightened. "Aye. I know what I saw. There’s a tunnel, barely wide enough for somethin’ crawlin’ through it. And I saw its damn eyes."

The two guards looked uneasy.

One of them muttered, "That ain't supposed to be possible. The vault’s been sealed for centuries."

Ogar shrugged. "Aye, well, it ain’t sealed no more. Ye best be tellin’ Thrain—"

"No."

Ogar blinked. "No?"

Varrik’s face was stone-hard.

"Ye don’t need to be tellin’ Thrain anything, miner. This is a security matter. We’ll handle it."

Ogar narrowed his eyes.

"What’s in them walls, Varrik? Ye know somethin’."

Ogar wasn’t the type to leave loose ends.

If there was something crawling behind the vault walls, he wasn’t going to wait for it to come knocking.

So, when Varrik and the other guards asked how to deal with it, he had a simple plan.

"We light a fire."

The guards looked at him.

"A fire? In the royal vault? Are ye mad?"

Ogar snorted, shaking his head. "Not just any fire. We burn the right herbs, smoke the bastard out. If it's a rat, it'll run. If it's somethin' worse… well, then we'll know."

Varrik exchanged a glance with the other guard, then sighed. "Fine. But if the High King gets wind of this, I'll be throwin' ye into the dungeon meself."

Ogar and the guards gathered bundles of strong-burning herbs, dried moss and fungal resin that produced thick, choking smoke when burned.

The tunnel was too small for a dwarf to crawl into, but that didn't matter.

Ogar pried open the stone again, shoved a burning torch inside, then added the herbs.

The smoke billowed in, curling thickly, vanishing into the dark cracks.

Then— They waited. At first, nothing. Then— A faint, hacking cough. More coughing. Then grumbling. Then— "GODS BLOODY DAMN IT!"

Out from the smoke-filled tunnel stumbled a small, soot-covered figure, coughing, waving his tiny arms.

Ogar's eyes widened in surprise. The guards stiffened. And the halfling thief—the very same one who'd been caught stealing in the mines weeks before—

Stumbled into the vault, gasping for air, his hair a mess, his face covered in soot.

He blinked blearily at Ogar, coughing.

Then scowled. "You are my BAD LUCK!"

Varrik and the other guards seized the little bastard, lifting him clean off the ground as he flailed and cursed.

"I WAS JUST PASSIN' THROUGH, YE BLOODY BIG-BEARD BASTARDS! I AIN'T DONE NOTHIN' WRONG!"

Ogar crossed his arms. "Aye, just happen to be crawlin' through a sealed tunnel into the royal vault, aye? Yer luck's run out, thief."

The halfling scowled, dusting soot off his coat.

"I weren't stealin' nothin'. Just explorin'."

Varrik grunted, shaking his head. "Aye, well, ye can 'explore' the inside o' the dungeon for a good while."

With that, the halfling was dragged away, still cursing.

Ogar chuckled, watching him go.

Then turned to the vault wall, pulling out mortar and fresh stone to seal it up properly.

Once it was done, no cracks remained.

No tunnels.

No more mysteries lurking in the dark.

A good job done.

And for it—he got paid 200 silver.

With his pouch a little heavier, Ogar marched straight to the Golden Beard Tavern.

The moment he stepped in, the scent of ale, roasted meat, and pipe smoke hit him like a hammer to the chest.

Just what he needed.

He clapped a few coins on the counter.

"Ale. Darkbane. And keep ‘em comin’."

The bartender, a thick-armed dwarf with a silver nose ring, gave a knowing chuckle. "Rough day, eh?"

Ogar took the first long gulp of ale, then sighed.

"Let’s just say I had to smoke out a rat."

The bartender snorted, sliding another mug his way. "Well, then, here’s to pest control."

Ogar laughed, then drank. And drank. And soon— The night blurred into the warm haze of drunken laughter, clashing mugs, and old songs sung off-key. A damn good night.

Ogar was three ales past drunk when he spotted Thrain Goldkeep sitting at the far end of the tavern, sipping a cup of wine with the calculating gaze of a dwarf always thinking about numbers.

Ogar, stumbling slightly, made his way over, a half-empty tankard in one hand, a stupid grin on his face.

"Oi, Thrain!"

The Master of Coin looked up, frowning. "Ogar. Ye smell like a brewery floor."

Ogar plopped himself into the seat across from him, sloshing ale onto the table.

"Aye, well, that's 'cause I've been celebratin'. Ye won't believe the shite I've been dealin' with lately."

Thrain sighed, rubbing his temples. "Oh? And what's got ye drinkin' yerself stupid?"

Ogar leaned in, lowering his voice like he was sharing a grand secret.

"Caught a thief in the royal vault today."

Thrain froze.

His eyes, sharp as a dagger, locked onto Ogar.

"What."

Ogar chuckled, taking another swig. "Aye, smoked the little bastard right out of a hidden tunnel. Thought it was somethin' crawlin' through the stone, but turns out it was the same damned halfling that got caught stealin' in the mines a while back."

Thrain's expression darkened. "And who exactly handled this situation?"

Ogar waved a hand lazily. "Varrik and his boys."

A pause.

Thrain set his cup down carefully.

"Varrik?"

"Aye. Sealed up the hole, threw the halfling in the dungeon, all nice and clean."

Thrain's fingers drummed slowly against the table.

"Funny. Varrik never mentioned any o' this to me."

Ogar blinked.

Then something clicked in his drunken brain.

His eyes narrowed slightly.

"...Aye. Now that I think about it, he told me not to tell ye. Said it was a 'security matter'."

Thrain's expression turned to stone.

The air around them shifted, the weight of suspicion settling heavy.

Thrain stood abruptly.

"Stay here, Ogar. I need to have a word with the King's Watch."

Ogar watched him go, his buzz fading slightly.

Something was very, very wrong.

The next morning, the city was buzzing.

Word spread fast—Thrain had personally ordered an investigation into Varrik, and under royal decree, the halfling was dragged out of his cell for questioning.

Ogar, still rubbing a hangover from his skull, stood near the city hall steps, watching as Thrain and a group of armored guards surrounded the halfling, who looked like a cornered rat.

The judge, an elderly but sharp-eyed dwarf named Durrik Stonehelm, peered down at the halfling from his raised seat.

"Halfling, ye're facin' charges of trespassin' in the King's Vault, breakin' and enterin', and conspirin' to steal from the royal treasury. Do ye deny it?"

The halfling wrung his hands, eyes darting from side to side.

"Look, look, I ain't denyin' nothin'! I was caught, aye? But I didn't plan this meself!"

Thrain's gaze sharpened. "Who helped ye?"

The halfling hesitated.

A pair of guards stepped forward, gripping their weapons.

The halfling gulped.

Then—

"It was Varrik!"

Gasps rippled through the crowd of watching dwarves.

Ogar's eyebrows shot up.

The judge's face remained unmoving, but his tone dropped cold.

"Explain."

The halfling licked his lips, eyes darting like a trapped weasel.

"He—he came to me weeks ago. Told me about the vault, showed me a detailed map o' the place. Told me exactly where to dig, how to get in and out without trippin' alarms."

More murmurs from the gathered dwarves.

"He was gonna let me do the dirty work, slip in, steal a bit at a time, pass it off through the tunnel. He knew exactly what he was doin'!"

Ogar muttered under his breath. "By the gods…"

Thrain's face was pure stone.

"Guards. Bring Varrik. Now."

Two days later, Varrik stood in the city square, his wrists bound, his beard roughly shaved—a mark of shame among dwarves.

A noose hung over the execution platform, swaying slightly.

A crowd had gathered—miners, merchants, smiths, nobles—all there to watch.

Ogar stood near the front, arms crossed, his expression grim.

Varrik's face was hard, defiant—but there was sweat on his brow.

Judge Durrik stepped forward, unrolling a parchment.

"Varrik Ironbrand. Ye have been found guilty of treason, theft, and conspiring against the crown. For these crimes, ye are sentenced to hang by the neck until dead. Do ye have any last words?"

Varrik's jaw clenched.

Then, slowly, he looked at Ogar.

His eyes burned with something unreadable.

"Ye should've taken the gold, miner."

Ogar's stomach twisted slightly.

But he said nothing.

The executioner pulled the lever. The platform dropped. Varrik's body jerked—his boots kicking for a moment. Then stillness.

The crowd murmured. Some cheered. Some whispered. Ogar exhaled. It was done.

That night, Ogar met Thrain back in the treasury hall. The Master of Coin tossed a heavy pouch onto the table. "One thousand silver, as promised."

Ogar picked it up, feeling the weight in his palm. It was more money than he'd ever held at once. Thrain met his gaze. "Ye did a good thing, Ogar. But I imagine ye know this ain't over. Smugglers, thieves—this ain't the end of their dealings. Just one link in the chain."

Ogar grunted. "Aye. But it’s a damn fine start."

Thrain gave a small, knowing smile. "Go drink, miner. Ye’ve earned it."

And so Ogar did.

A step into Darkness

Ogar settled back into his usual life, spending his days in the mines, swinging his pickaxe, hauling ore, repairing tunnel supports.

It was hard work, but it was simple, honest, and—most importantly—it kept his mind off the past.

The smuggling conspiracy, Varrik’s execution, the King's Vault— all of it had slowly faded into the background noise of life.

Or so he thought.

Until one fateful evening when he returned home—

And found the note.

Ogar stepped through the wooden door of his home, expecting the familiar warmth of Leda’s cooking, the scent of freshly carved wood from whatever project she’d been working on.

Instead—

The place was quiet.

Too quiet.

His stomach twisted.

"Leda?"

No answer.

He stepped further in, his boots creaking against the wooden planks.

Then he saw it.

A scrap of parchment, placed on the table, a dagger driven through the center, pinning it down.

Ogar yanked the blade free, snatching up the paper.

His eyes darkened as he read the message.

"A debt was paid in blood, miner. You thought it was over. You thought you won. But you took something from us. Now we take something from you. If you ever want to see her alive again, come find us. Bring no guards. No council. No law. Only you. Come alone, or she dies. – The Blooded Hand"

Ogar's hands shook.

A rage—a deep, seething rage— coiled in his gut like a smoldering forge ready to explode.

His Leda.

They had taken his Leda.

His knuckles whitened as he clenched the note, crumpling it into his fist.

Whoever these bastards were, they had made one hell of a mistake.

Ogar stormed into the Golden Beard Tavern, his eyes ablaze, jaw set in a grim line.

Tormli and Brokk were at their usual table, drinking and laughing, but the moment they saw Ogar's face, the mood shifted.

Brokk frowned. "Ye look like ye just found a goblin pissin' in yer soup. What's wrong?"

Ogar slammed the crumpled note onto the table.

Tormli grabbed it, his eyes scanning the words, his face growing paler with each line.

By the end, his hands were clenched into fists.

"Those rotten, low-born, piss-drinking bastards."

Brokk's expression darkened, his hand instinctively moving to his axe.

"Who are they? The Blooded Hand? I ain't heard o' them before."

Ogar growled. "I'd wager it's the bastards who lost out when we exposed Varrik's little scheme. Some smugglin' gang."

Tormli nodded grimly. "Aye. Makes sense. We cut off their coin flow, got their man hanged. Now they're takin' revenge."

Ogar took a deep breath, trying to steady the rage boiling inside him. "We need to find her. Now." Tormli and Brokk exchanged a glance. Then, without hesitation, they stood. "Then we best get goin'."

They searched the darkest corners of the city—

The under-bridges, the slums, the alleys where shadows whispered deals of gold and steel.

They questioned drunks, paid off beggars for information, tracked the movements of the filth that lurked in the night.

Each lead brought them deeper into the city's gutters, into the places where law had no reach.

Then— A lead. A whisper. A network of tunnels beneath the city, a place where the unwanted and the unseen thrived. The sewers.

Ogar gritted his teeth. "We go in, we don't leave till we got her back." Brokk nodded, gripping his axe. "And anyone in our way dies screamin'."

The air was thick with rot, the damp stone walls slick with moss and filth as the trio crept through the underground tunnels.

Torchlight flickered ahead, the glow of fires beyond an archway, voices muttering low in conversation.

Then— A voice. Leda's. "You bastards touch me again, and I'll carve your eyes out meself!" Ogar froze. A surge of pure, burning fury shot through his veins.

Without thinking, he stormed forward— And the fight began.

The thieves barely had time to react before Ogar crashed through the doorway, his sword gleaming in the firelight.

The first man barely turned before Ogar's blade slashed across his neck, blood spraying the stone walls.

Tormli and Brokk followed right behind, axes swinging, cutting into flesh, smashing bones.

Leda was bound to a chair, her face bruised but defiant, her eyes burning with fury.

"Took ye long enough!" she growled. Ogar barely heard her—too busy gutting another thief.

The remaining thieves drew their weapons, snarling, fanning out to surround them. The leader—a scar-faced dwarf with a missing ear— sneered. "Ye should've taken the gold, miner. Now ye die."

Ogar bared his teeth.

"Not before I send ye all to the Stonefather first."

Then— Chaos.

Steel clashed against steel, the cramped space filled with the sounds of battle.

Ogar caught a dagger to his side, but he ignored the pain, smashing his fist into the attacker's jaw, sending teeth flying.

Tormli took a heavy strike to his shoulder, but drove his axe straight through a man's chest in return.

Brokk was a whirlwind of rage, hacking through bodies, blood coating his armor.

One by one, the thieves fell. Until only the leader remained. He tried to run. Ogar caught him by the back of his coat, yanked him back— And buried his sword into the bastard's gut.

The thief gasped—choked—then slumped over. Dead.

Ogar exhaled heavily. It was over.

Ogar rushed to Leda, cutting her bindings free. She rubbed her wrists, then punched him square in the chest. "What took ye so damn long?!"

Ogar laughed, pulling her into a tight embrace. "Had to make sure we killed 'em all first."

She huffed, but held onto him. "Yer an idiot."

Ogar grinned. "Aye. But I'm yer idiot."

When they returned to the surface, Ogar reported the dead thieves to the authorities.

Thrain himself handed him a pouch of 200 silver. "For cleanin' up the city's filth."

Ogar took it, but all he cared about— Was that Leda was safe. He wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close as they walked home.

For now, it was over.

Miners Life

After the bloodshed and shadows of the past months, Ogar had hoped for a bit of peace.

Instead— He found himself in the middle of a miners' feud. It started in the Golden Beard Tavern, where Ogar was enjoying a quiet drink after a long shift. Hurgin Stonefist—a broad-shouldered, red-bearded miner with fists like anvils— stormed inside, his face red with fury. "Oi! Ogar! Ye got a minute?"

Ogar sighed, setting down his tankard. "What now, Hurgin? Someone spill yer ale?" Hurgin slammed his fist on the table, making the drinks shake. "No! Some filthy rat stole me pickaxe! Me great-grandfather's pick! The one passed down through me family!"

Ogar frowned. "Ye sure ye just didn't misplace it? Ye do drink more than most."

Hurgin growled. "I may be drunk most o’ the time, but I ain’t blind. Someone took it, and I need it back before me next shift, or I ain’t workin’."

Ogar leaned back, rubbing his chin. "And what happens if ye don’t work?"

Hurgin grunted. "The overseers’ll throw a fit. Without me, the whole team’s short-handed. Won’t be no ore hauled. Delays. The whole mine shift gets bollixed."

Ogar sighed. "Who do ye think took it?"

Hurgin huffed, crossing his arms.

"Some say a jealous miner. Others say a gambler pawned it off. Either way, someone’s gonna get their teeth knocked in."

Ogar stood up, grabbing his axe belt. "Let’s go find it."

Ogar and Hurgin questioned miners, bartenders, and debtors in the lower tunnels and alehouses.

A name kept coming up—Drenn Coldhands, a reckless gambler who owed coin all over the city.

Ogar found Drenn slumped against a barrel outside a run-down tavern, his nose already swollen from some earlier beating.

The moment Drenn saw them, he tried to run.

Hurgin grabbed him by the collar and lifted him off the ground.

"WHERE’S ME PICK, YE FILTHY BASTARD?!"

Drenn coughed, kicking his legs uselessly.

"I—I had to sell it! I had no choice! I was gonna lose me fingers to the collectors!"

Ogar gritted his teeth. "Who’d ye sell it to?"

Drenn swallowed hard. "It—it’s in the hands of a gang enforcer now. In the backroom dice games at the Smoked Rat Tavern."

Hurgin tossed him aside with a curse. "If me pick’s broken, I’ll break yer skull!"

Ogar sighed. "Looks like we’re headin’ to the slums."

The Smoked Rat Tavern was a place for the worst kind of scum. It reeked of cheap ale, unwashed bodies, and stale pipe smoke. Ogar and Hurgin pushed through the crowds, stepping into a dimly lit backroom, where dice clattered on wooden tables, coins changed hands, and rough men exchanged ugly grins.

At the center of the room, a massive, scarred dwarf leaned against a pile of winnings—and sitting atop it, like a joke, was Hurgin’s ancestral pickaxe. The enforcer’s black eyes flicked toward them. "Somethin’ I can do for ye, lads?"

Hurgin’s eyes blazed. "That’s me pick! I want it back!"

The enforcer chuckled, leaning forward. "Aye? I won it fair. Paid good coin for it. If ye want it, then yer gonna have to win it back."

Ogar crossed his arms. "Or we could take it." The room went silent. The enforcer grinned.

"Aye? Then let’s see ye try." Then— The fight began.

The enforcer lunged first, throwing a heavy fist toward Hurgin’s jaw.

But Hurgin dodged, driving his own fist into the enforcer’s gut, sending him stumbling back.

Ogar grabbed a chair, smashing it over the head of another thug who tried to get involved.

The backroom exploded into chaos.

Hurgin grabbed a dice table, flipping it over as he charged the enforcer again, fists flying.

Ogar ducked a swinging bottle, grabbing a gambler by the collar and throwing him headfirst into the bar.

"YE BASTARDS!" The enforcer roared, charging like a bull.

He tackled Hurgin, slamming him into the wall.

Ogar grabbed a beer keg, smashing it into the enforcer’s head, sending him toppling over.

The room stank of ale, blood, and broken teeth.

Finally— The enforcer groaned, spitting out a loose tooth. He held up a hand, breathing heavily. "Enough! Take yer bloody pick!"

Hurgin snatched it from the table, holding it like a long-lost child. "Aye, ye rotten bastards, it’s mine! ME PICK!"

Ogar chuckled, rubbing his bruised knuckles. "Next time, don’t steal from a miner."

Hurgin marched proudly back to the mines the next day, his pick in hand, his honor restored.

The steady rhythm of pickaxes striking stone filled the tunnels of the mine, a familiar symphony of labor and sweat.

Ogar swung his pickaxe, each strike biting deep into the rough stone, loosening chunks of iron ore from the walls. The dust clung to his arms and beard, his muscles aching from hours of toil.

He took a moment to wipe his brow, leaning on the handle of his pickaxe, surveying the dimly lit cavern.

Wooden scaffolding creaked under the weight of other miners as they hauled carts filled with ore, their voices grumbling about the day's work.

A lantern flickered overhead, casting dancing shadows against the rock walls, illuminating the countless veins that ran like rivers of silver and black through the heart of the mountain.

The air was thick with the smell of earth, sweat, and burning oil.

A typical day.

But one he never complained about.

Hard work, honest work.

Still—he was looking forward to his next free day.

The next morning, Ogar and Leda packed light—just a few provisions, a sturdy stonewood raft, and their sense of adventure.

The Silverflow River ran deep beneath the mountain, a swift but gentle underground waterway, its waters shimmering like liquid moonlight beneath the cavern's glowing walls.

Ogar and Leda stepped onto their raft, made from dwarven stonewood, a rare type of timber that floated like any boat, but was as strong as steel.

Ogar grabbed a long-handled guiding pole, pushing them gently off the rocky shore.

Leda settled beside him, a mischievous smile on her face.

"Bet ye can't steer without hittin' a single rock."

Ogar snorted. "Bet I can."

"Bet ye can't."

"Bet I—DAMN IT!"

The raft bumped against a rock, causing Leda to burst into laughter.

Ogar grumbled, but he was smiling.

The quartz veins along the cavern walls reflected the light of the underground river, making it look as though they were floating through a sky filled with stars.

Leda sighed, leaning against him. "It's beautiful."

Ogar nodded, his hand tightening on the guiding pole.

"Aye. Almost don’t feel like we’re underground."

She nudged him playfully. "Just don’t get too distracted an’ send us crashin’."

Ogar chuckled. "I’d never."

As they drifted further, Leda suddenly gasped.

"Ogar, look!"

She pointed toward the riverbanks, where delicate clusters of glowing blue lilies bloomed along the water’s edge.

Ogar recognized them instantly—Silverflow Lilies, known to bloom only once a year, their petals shimmering like ethereal fireflies.

Leda’s eyes gleamed.

"I want one."

Ogar grinned. "Then hold on."

With a strong push, he maneuvered the raft close to the lilies, steadying the boat as Leda leaned over, plucking one of the rare blossoms.

She held it close, admiring its soft glow.

"It’s warm, like holdin’ a little flame."

Ogar nodded. "Aye. The roots soak up heat from the stone. That’s why they only grow here."

Leda smiled, tucking the lily into her satchel.

"Aye? Then I guess it’s mine to keep."

The water began to move faster, the river twisting into tighter tunnels, rushing forward with greater speed.

Ogar quickly grabbed the guiding pole, his instincts kicking in.

"Hold on, Leda, this is gettin’ rough!"

Leda laughed, gripping the sides of the raft as they shot through a narrow passage, the water pulling them through twisting turns.

The cavern walls blurred past them, glowing quartz streaking like lightning in their periphery.

Ogar gritted his teeth, steering left, then right, dodging jutting rocks that threatened to crack their raft apart.

Leda whooped, the thrill of the ride lighting up her face.

"This is better than any tavern drink!"

Ogar chuckled, keeping the raft steady.

"Aye, but I'd still take an ale after this."

As the river calmed, they glided into a vast cavern, where the ceiling was covered in bioluminescent mushrooms, glowing in shades of blue, purple, and gold—

A false night sky, deep beneath the earth.

But that wasn't the only wonder.

On the far side of the cavern, a stone landing jutted out over the river, leading to a long-forgotten dwarven resting hall.

Stone benches, carved tables, and an old hearth sat untouched, frozen in time.

Leda's eyes widened.

"Ogar… this place…"

Ogar guided the raft to shore, stepping off carefully.

"Aye. A real piece o' history. And no one's been here in gods know how long."

They walked inside, running their hands over the smooth stone walls, the intricate carvings of dwarves long past.

Everything was silent. Peaceful.

A forgotten hall, waiting to be used once more.

Leda turned to Ogar, a grin on her face.

"Well, I say we claim it as ours. A secret place, just for us."

Ogar smiled.

"Aye. Then let's make ourselves at home."

They lit a fire in the old hearth, warming the chamber once more.

Ogar cooked a simple stew over the flames, the scent of seasoned meat filling the air.

They ate together, sharing laughter and old stories, the glow of the Silverflow Lily resting between them.

For once—there were no dangers.

No threats.

No wars.

Just them, the river, and the hidden hall beneath the stars of glowing mushrooms.

As they drifted off to sleep, Ogar glanced at Leda, her face peaceful, the light of the hearth casting soft shadows across her features.

He closed his eyes, exhaling deeply.

For the first time in a long while…

He felt truly at peace.